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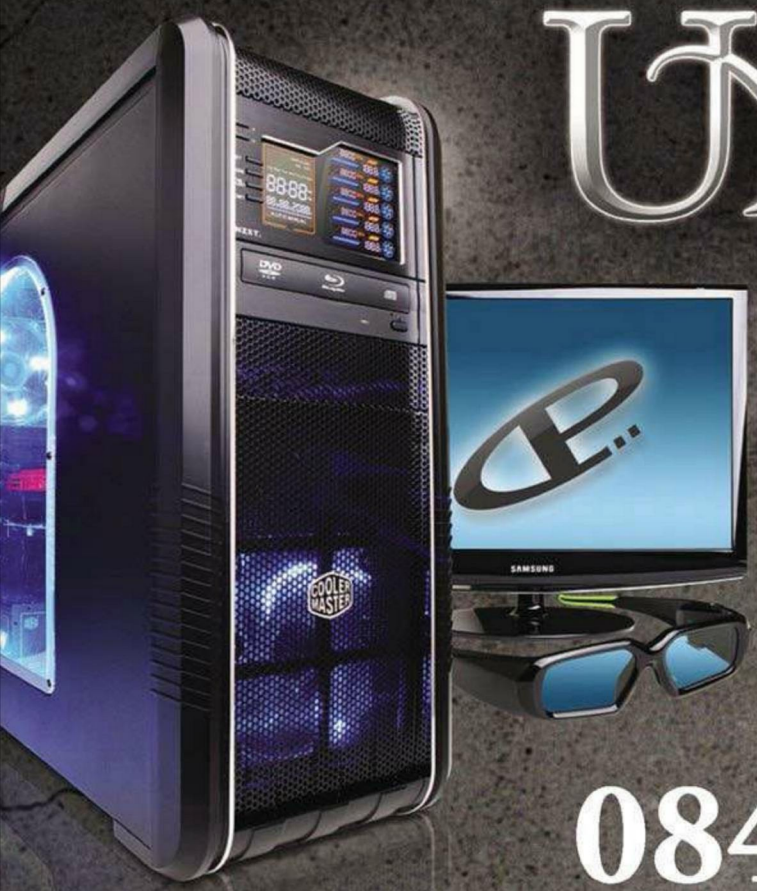
*Requires Steam and Empire: Total War. For full instructions see page 66.



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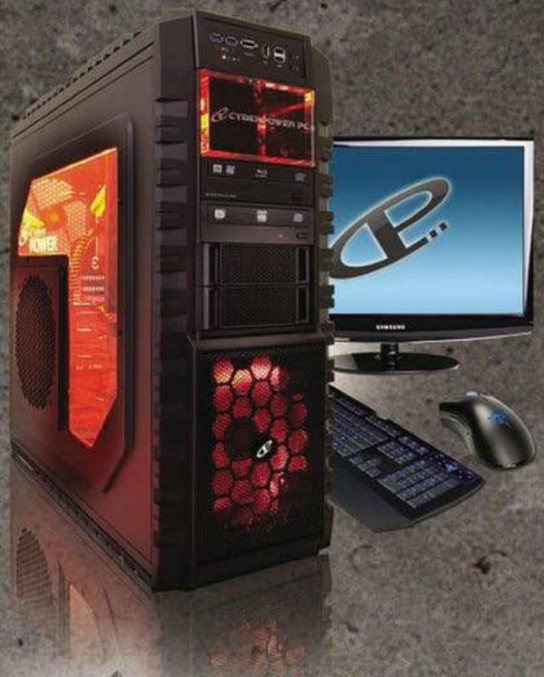

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Big niche

This month's cover is unusual, I think. *Shogun 2: Fall of the Samurai* demonstrates what I love about PC gaming – that we can delve into the very depths of a time or place and simulate it to extraordinary detail. *Fall of the Samurai* takes us to an almost ludicrously specific era in the history of Japan, and places it under the *Total War* microscope. The Boshin War only lasted for two years, yet when I read about everything Creative Assembly are putting together for us, I feel like I could happily play the *Total War* version in real-time.

I'm always fascinated by niches. I feel that the more detailed your focus, the more passionate and occasionally wide your audience. DotA is about the most niche product PC gaming could have come up with: a map from a real-time strategy game that merged tower defence with an RPG yet somehow snared near 20 million players. The UK is one of the few spots in the world that never exploded with DotA love – but I feel that's starting to change. This issue, we spoke to Valve to discover why and how they're building *Dota 2*. It might have something to do with those 20 million players.

The Top 100 has been a staple of the magazine since we launched, although back then the team could only find 50 games worth celebrating. This year, we've retained a similar format – writers explaining why they love their favourite games – but upped the silly photo quotient. And I made the classic magazine editor's mistake of forgetting that the X-Factor will have finished a good six weeks before you get to read the words. Duh. Enjoy the issue.

Tim Edwards

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EDITOR
tim.edwards@futurenet.com
@hanknova

Talk to PC Gamer
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BRINGING YOU THE SCOOPS THIS MONTH...

Tom Francis
@pentadact
Made bread so tasty the PC Gamer team simultaneously collapsed and exploded.

Graham Smith
@gonnas
WHAT THE HELL DID HE DO TO HIS FACE. YOU'LL FIND OUT SOON ENOUGH, READERS.

Owen Hill
@bopogamel
Killed so many men, his eyes started glowing bright red. Bit of a sith, to be honest.

Rich McCormick
@richmcc
At the very final hurdle, the very final day, his bowels exploded. What a complete faildog.

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And get an awesome Roccat headset!
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"It's hard to think of a more alluring theme."

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Valve's upcoming take on the wildly successful DotA template caters to the original mod's hardcore following, but will it draw in genre newcomers? Tom spoke to developer Erik Johnson to find out the answer.

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FREE GAME!
Turn to page 66 for your glorious **free stuff**.

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Six years in the making, BioWare's first MMO is finally here. How it'll change over time we don't know, but *TOR* already rivals *WoW* for slickness, scale, and spectacle, all in a Star Wars wrapping.

152 MAKING OF BIOSHOCK

Andrew Ryan was originally five evil AIs, the game's Little Sisters were sea slugs, and the whole thing took place on a Nazi-infested island. Ken Levine talks us through *BioShock*'s genesis.

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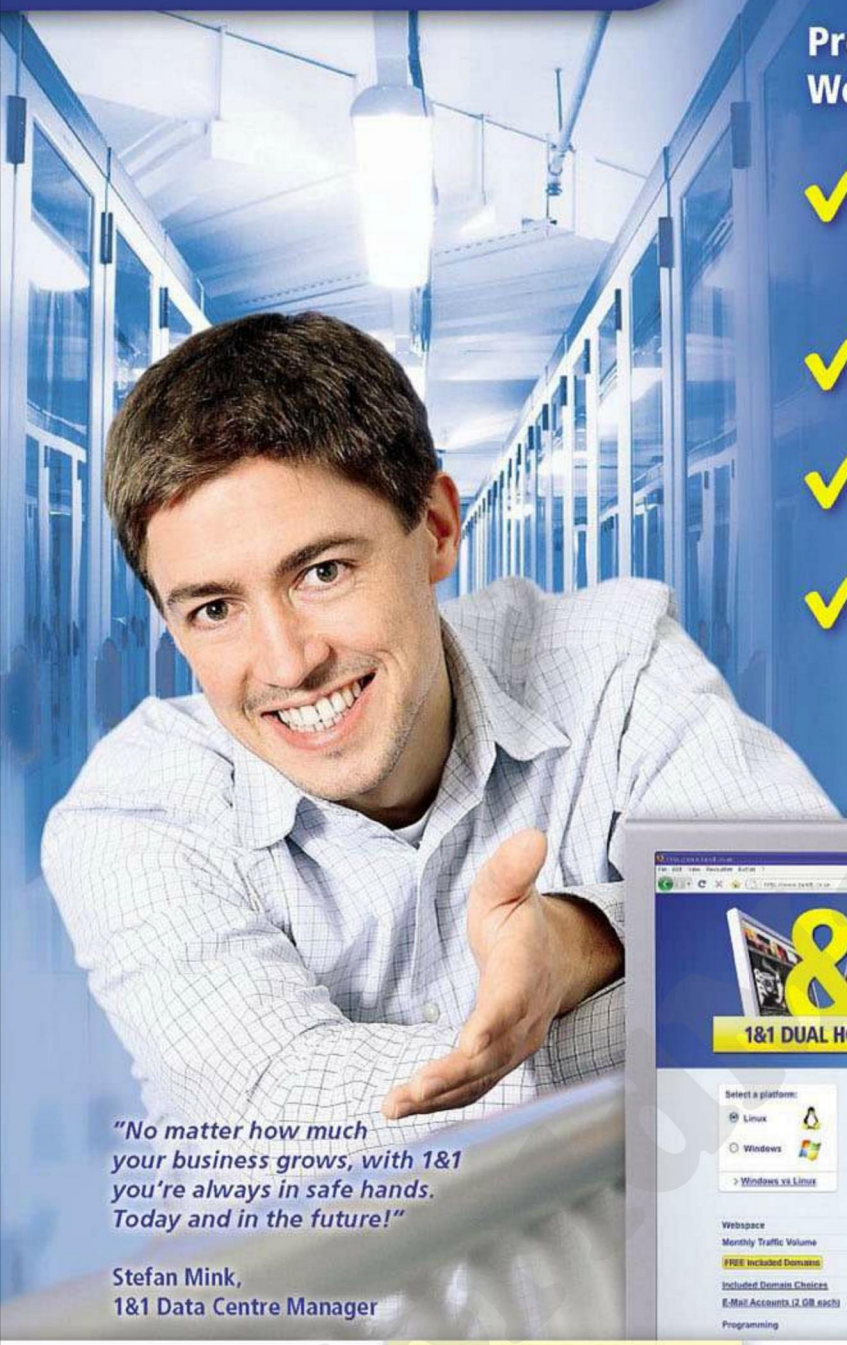

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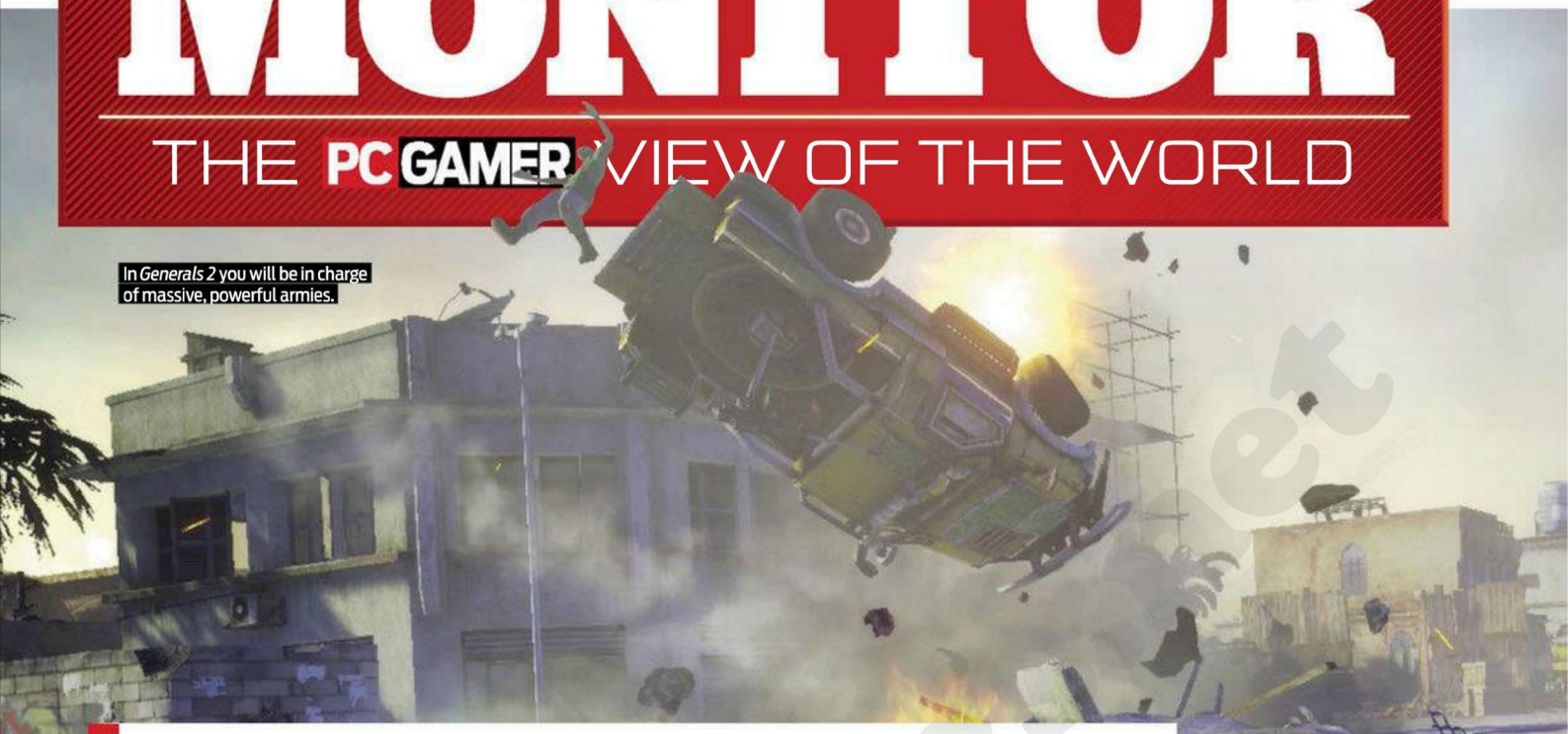
THE PC GAMER VIEW OF THE WORLD



In *Generals 2* you will be in charge of massive, powerful armies.

Command & Conquer returns

THE BIG STORY *Generals 2* brings *C&C* back to modern warfare

Command & Conquer: Generals 2 was announced at this year's Spike VGA awards. The new game will return to the serious near-future setting of the original *Generals*, meaning a *Command & Conquer* game without Kane, Tiberium, or attack dolphins.

Generals 2 will use Frostbite 2, the engine EA DICE built for *Battlefield 3*, and the brief trailer released at the VGA awards looked stunning. It showed GLA tanks under assault from EU forces in a Middle Eastern setting familiar from the original game. It also showed VTOL aircraft that made it clear we could expect fictional units among the grim reality.

The original *Generals* was released in 2003 and followed a conflict between the United States, China and the Global Liberation Army, a fictional terrorist group. It was much darker subject matter than any *C&C* game before or since, and included missions based on real-world locations and suicide bombers as units.

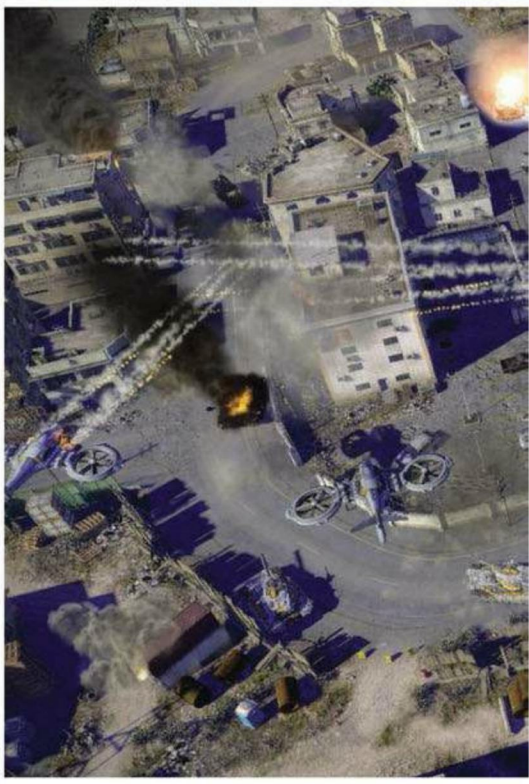
"We are definitely not making a departure from the tone of the original *Generals*," says Jon Van Caneghem, the new game's executive producer, when asked whether dogs could drive jeeps. "We think there's a great opportunity to deliver over-the-top-action, but to keep the intensity high."

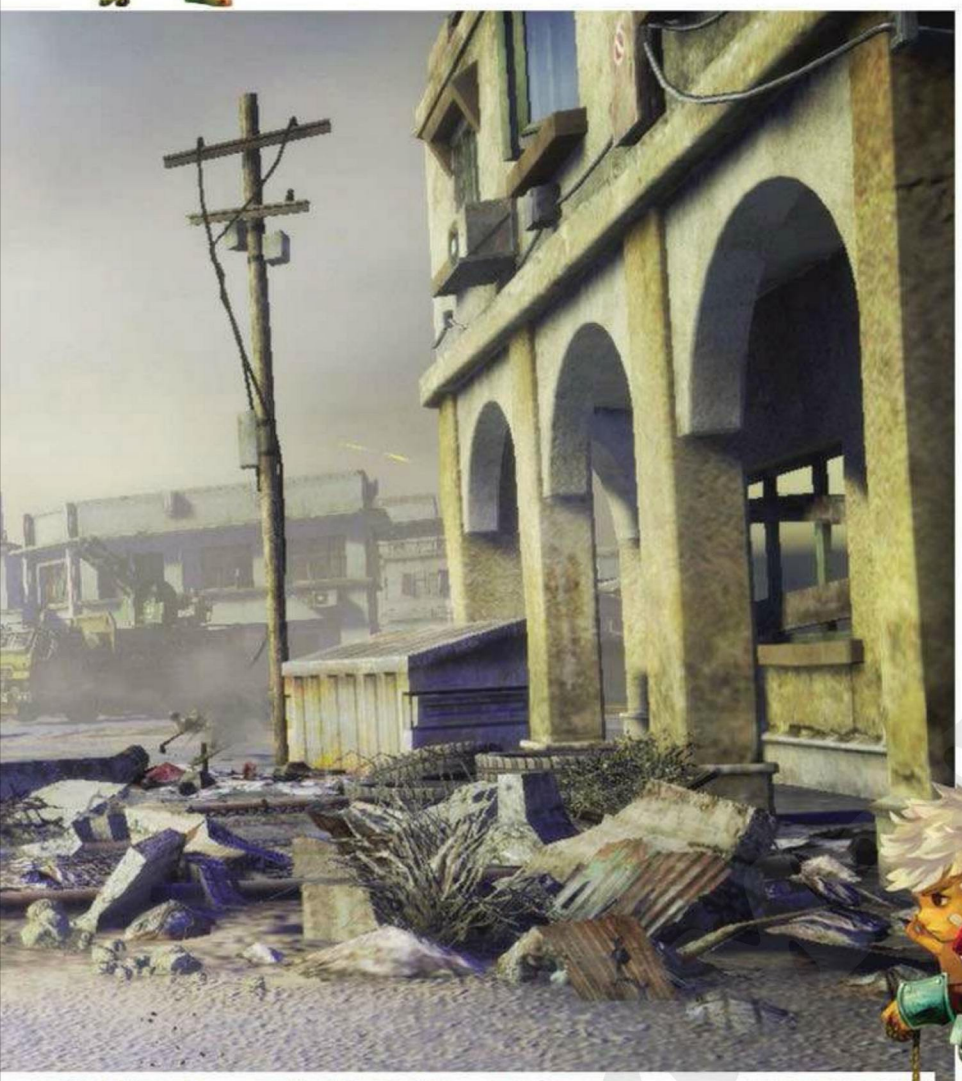
That's not the only reason to return the setting to a more recognisable version of modern warfare: *Generals* remains the best-selling game in the series.

The sequel is being developed by BioWare Victory, a new EA studio led by Van Caneghem, the creator of the *Might & Magic* series and its many spin-offs.

There are few more specific details available right now, but Van Caneghem says the team have plans for singleplayer and for "more than just your typical deathmatch, both in terms of competitive and cooperative multiplayer". We await word from BioWare on which units will be romanceable. ■

Graham Smith





Just before a landmark peace accord, the world's leaders are killed in a terrorist attack.

GAMES MAKE YOU THE BOSS

BRAINS BLIZZARD'S STRATEGY OPUS STARCRAFT II CAN TEACH US HOW TO PUT OUT FIRES

Researchers at the Simon Fraser University in Canada are using *StarCraft II* replays to study how the human brain learns to multitask. Their project, SkillCraft, looks at how to teach the skills essential for emergency management: the distribution of attention and resources during a crisis. They're not currently accepting new replays, but you can find out more at *skillcraft.ca*. **CT**

BASTION IN YOUR BROWSER

TECH NATIVE CLIENT BRINGS FULL GAMES TO CHROME

It's now possible to play the full version of Supergiant Games' isometric indie adventure *Bastion* in Google Chrome, thanks to the search giant's Native Client technology. Developers are able to run compiled code within the browser, bypassing the need for long downloads and particular operating systems. *Bastion* is the first high-profile game to make the leap, but it'll be followed this year by Square Enix's *Mini Ninjas*. If the technology takes off, expect 'browser game' to have a whole new meaning before the year is out. You can try *Bastion* in Chrome for yourself at: *bit.ly/bastionchrome*. **CT**

HEALTH BAR

SORTING GOOD NEWS FROM BAD

Winners

4 million!
The number of people who visited *PCGamer.com* in November. You people are the best.

E-Sports
Both MLG and DreamHack post record viewer numbers for their recent tournaments.

Serious Sam 3 DRM
Unleashes an angry, invulnerable pink scorpion on gamers playing pirated copies.

Backwards dragons
Skyrim's first patch sends its most iconic monsters shooting through the air tail-first.

Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance
There is now literally nothing too dumb for the games industry.

Glitch unlaunched
The side-scrolling MMO went back to beta just a month after launch because it wasn't fun to play.

Faildogs

Humble Indie Bundle takes $10 million

DRM-free, pay-what-you-want indie games have become big business

Five years ago, if you asked a successful indie developer if they'd like to sell their entire back catalogue for a minimum of one cent, they might have been offended. Now, it's one of the highest honours and most lucrative opportunities in game development.

The Humble Indie Bundle was started by a few talented but not hugely famous developers, Wolfire Games, in May 2010. They'd noticed that certain bundles of games sold well on Steam, and wanted to combine elements of those offers with other features they liked: cross-platform compatibility, no DRM, pay-what-you-want, and a custom charitable donation.

The result, eight bundles later, is more than $10 million raised. "That's meant about $5 million raised for developers, more than $3 million for charity, and less than $1 million for Humble Bundle," says one of the organisers, Richard Esguerra.

The first bundle contained six games, including Wolfire's own rabbit fighting game *Lugaru* and perennial favourite *World of Goo*. Later bundles included *Braid*, *Trine*, *VVVVVV*, *Frozen Synapse* and *Darwinia*, the bundles taking an average of $1.2 million dollars each.

Can't you just pirate the bundle? You can. Can't you get it for one cent? You can. But the Humble Indie Bundles aren't about trying to *force* people to hand over cash, they're about goodwill. The organisers are making a good faith gesture towards the gaming community, trusting that there are enough people willing to give something back to outweigh those determined to take things for free. The result of that faith is one of the fastest growing and most successful indie publishing schemes in history.

"The Humble Bundle organisers have no plans to stop: their eighth bundle is underway"

The trailer for each bundle explains what's interesting about the games in an accessible, funny way, and they're all cool ideas you haven't played before. When you buy, you decide not only how much to pay, but exactly who your money goes to, customising the split between the developers, charities and organisers. Everything about the process is easy, quick and accessible – in other words, the smart side of commercialism.

Since the first two bundles, they've branched out into more than just repackaging existing games: earlier this year, the relatively unknown shooter *Voxatron* launched as a 'Humble Debut' and sold 172,000 copies, with other games added as bonuses throughout the promotion. Most recently, Introversion made around $190,000 and doubled the audience for their games by releasing their whole back catalogue as a Humble Bundle.

The Humble Bundle organisers have no plans to stop: their eighth bundle is underway and has taken its first $1 million seven times faster than their previous bestseller. They're already a huge force for good in PC gaming, and it's exciting that they might become a permanent fixture. ■

BUNDLES OF CASH How much the first seven bundles have made

Impromptu powercuts at Black Mesa were always commonplace.

Half-Life thru a lens

We travel to Black Mesa and go behind the scenes of fan movie Half-Life: Origins

Valve have always been reluctant to make you watch a movie when you could be playing a game, and we love them for it. It hasn't stopped independent filmmakers from embracing the series, though. *Half-Life 2* has had by far the most attention, the drab urban environs of City 17 being relatively easy to recreate if you are a filmmaker on a budget. Brian Curtin's Half-Life: Origins is a rare and highly successful attempt to capture the mood and atmosphere of the original game.

It's a faithful if stylised recreation of the opening sequence, which blends live action with CGI. "Everyone who's played the game remembers where it all started," Curtin explains. "The tram ride is painfully long, but it allows you to be drawn in. I always thought Valve were ballsy to open the game like that – they knew what they were doing."

One of the reasons the film works so well is the careful use of original game sounds and textures. The metallic clank of a walkway, the hiss of a blast-door, the bleeps and bloops of computers and access panels: each ingrained in the gamer psyche after years of exposure. Use of this technique was partly born of necessity, however: "It's a cheap method," says Curtin. "It's not quick, but blending those elements gives you a lot of control. I would rather not use CG in my work, but sometimes that's the best option."

If that budget had stretched further, Curtin would have included the experiment itself. "I really wanted it to end with the resonance cascade. I've got some great visions for showing Gordon in the test chamber as he's about to mess things up. If anyone wants to get me an HEV suit, I can make it happen."

Valve were positive about Curtin's first *Half-Life* film, Beyond Black Mesa, but they've been rather quiet about his further work. "They were very helpful, but not too interested," Curtin says. "I'm sure they're busy putting the finishing touches on *Half-Life 3*, right?"

You can watch Half-Life: Origins and Curtin's other shorts on his YouTube channel: *bit.ly/InfectiousDesigner*. ■

Chris Thursten

Does... not... commute.

Meet Barney, security guard by day, man in purple dinosaur outfit by night.

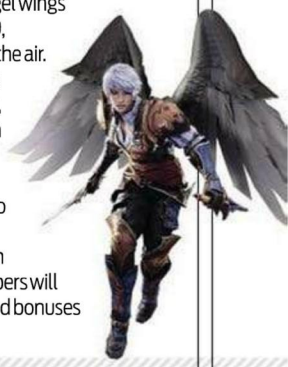
RICHARD GARRIOTT'S ULTIMATE RPG

SOCIAL LORD BRITISH'S NEXT PROJECT IS A RETURN TO HIS ROOTS

In an interview with Eurogamer, *Ultima* creator and sometime astronaut Richard Garriott has described his new project as the "spiritual successor of the *Ultima* series". Garriott explains that "proper social tools are compatible with the Ultimate RPG", lowering the barrier to entry and making the first few hours with a new game much more pleasant. **CT**

AION GOES FREE-TO-PLAY

ONLINE ANGELIC MMO LOOKING TO SPREAD ITS WINGS



CryEngine-powered MMO *Aion* will be free from February, NCSoft have said. The game is notable for the massive angel wings your character earns at level 9, allowing you to soar through the air. Almost all of the game will be available for non-subscribers, with the exception of a cap on the maximum amount of money you can earn in a single day: a move intended to crack down on gold farmers. Players can pay for a premium account, and existing subscribers will receive many of the associated bonuses for free. **CT**

SAY WHAT?

THE MONTH IN TONGUES

"One of the greatest things about digital distribution is what it does to reduce the used game market. I hope digital distribution stabs the used game market in the heart."
Chris Avellone, **chief creative officer, Obsidian Entertainment, speaking to IndustryGamers**

"If you look at *EVE* in a macro sense, then no, it's probably not a game. I would say it's an experience, it's a virtual world with gaming elements to it."
Arnar Hrafn Gylfason, **senior producer, CCP**

"We are giving away most of the content for free. It's easy to download, there's no DRM that will pollute your experience."
Sébastien Arnoult, producer, ***Ghost Recon Online***

FACE OFF

Is it a good idea to start paying modders?

YES Giving creative people the support they need can only be good for PC gaming.

NO Cash will tempt the mod scene towards the commercialism it's meant to subvert.

Tim Edwards sees the pound signs in the fringes of the mod landscape. And he wants them.

Graham Smith used to make mods for the fun of it. He now pays his bills with fun, and burns it when he's cold.

TE: Bethesda have announced that *Skyrim* will get extensive mod support .You'll be able to browse, install and review mods via the Steam Workshop – the same website Valve use to prioritise which community-created content gets into *Team Fortress 2*. Although Bethesda have said they're concentrating on free mods, it raises the possibility that modders will be able to start charging for their work in the near future. And I think this is brilliant. Apparently, you disagree. I can't think of a single reason why.

GS: Mods are brilliant precisely because they're non-commercial. While the games industry is constrained by budgets and the pursuit of money, a dedicated group of modders can create something bizarre, obtuse and specific for the simple passion of it. Some of *Oblivion*'s greatest mods were born that way, adding working clocks across Cyrodiil, or hyper-detailed book covers. Once money is an option, people will be tempted to create something they can sell, and that will lead to a less vibrant, less interesting modding community.

TE: I need to download that clocks mod immediately. Ever noticed that in PC gaming, the more dense, the more detailed the change, the more important it is to us? Like the mod for *Silent Hunter 3* that adds period music to your in-game gramophone. Or the multiple uniform mods for the *Total War* games. Or Project Reality for *Battlefield 2*. Why? Because games are built by game developers to specifications. A team of ten, fifty, even a hundred, working within limits, can't match a team of undirected, undisciplined, passionate fans.

GS: Exactly! But while you'd love the working clocks mod, you'd be unlikely to pay for it. You have a kid now. You can't afford working clocks. That means that people will be less likely to *make* working clocks, and more likely to spend their time making something more mainstream.

TE: Wrong. Absolutely wrong. I've no interest in buying any more games. I only want one game, one game that I can play forever. Today, that game is *Skyrim*. Tomorrow, that game will be a *Total War* game. On Friday, it will probably be *Battlefield 3*. This is the point I'm making: we've already got great games. Why not pay the community to make them even better? A better great old game is worth more to me than a slightly worse new still worse game. If you see what I mean.

GS: The community is already making them better, but let's assume that people continue to make all the mods they do now, only now they charge for them. As a consumer. I'm no longer getting brilliant free stuff. Instead, it's yet another thing I have to pay for. The added cost of mods means that my game purchases have lesser value, and I can try fewer of the weird ones. Equally, think of the children. I know kids who are still playing *Oblivion* five years later, and they don't have the credit cards or money to buy mods or new games.

TE: Communist. Anyway, kids love spending their parent's money. Better they spend it on better clocks and animated Kha'Jit tails than on teeth-rotting sweets and/or piano lessons. AMIRITE?

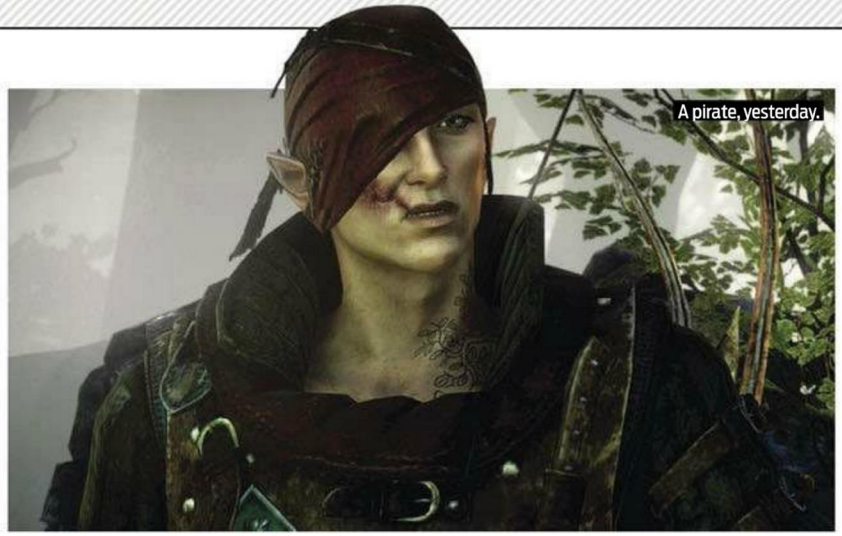
GS: Convincing their parents of that might be harder. Let's move away from the clocks, though. What about *Counter-Strike*? It was a new, risky idea, but it was also big, with plenty of new maps, models and textures. After a modest start, its popularity grew as people took a chance on it because it was free. As the rest of the industry moves towards a free-to-play model precisely because accessibility attracts huge audiences, why is it a good thing if mods make it harder for us to love them?

TE: I don't believe there will be less mods to love, nor do I think there will be less free stuff to play with. I do think, though, that giving the modders the chance to work on their project full time will produce better mods, and that creating a market for mods will increase the number of people working in the space. More modders, better modders, and more modders making free mods to get recognition. Isn't that brilliant for gamers?

GS: It could all turn out fine, in theory, but I'm a small town kind of guy, and a mod marketplace is a massive Tesco opening at the edge of town. It could mean more choice and better prices for consumers, but it could also crush the quaint local man, Frank, who makes high resolution book covers. And these days, there's already plenty of Tescos, and precious few Franks. I'm not sure we can afford to lose more.

The debate is over

But who is your money on? Tell us your thoughts at *pcgamer.com/forum*


A pirate, yesterday.

The Witcher 2 devs take on piracy

Company demands compensation from thousands of suspected pirates

The Witcher 2 developers CD Projekt RED claim to have an accurate way to identify pirates of their Polish roleplaying game. Last month, the company started sending legal letters to thousands of suspected pirates in Germany, demanding monetary compensation and threatening further court action should anyone refuse to pay. Speaking to PC Gamer, CD Projekt RED's vice president of business development Michal Nowakowski said, "We're not worried about tracking the wrong people."

The Witcher 2 was released without DRM software on CD Projekt's own GOG.com, making it particularly easy to pirate. CDP Red say that move has paid off, with the game selling a million copies when combined with retail versions that included DRM. But they also estimate that roughly 4.5 million copies have been downloaded illegally.

These same methods caused controversy in 2008 when UK law firm Davenport Lyons sent out letters on behalf of record companies and games publishers, and numerous innocent people were accused. Most attempts at identifying pirates use IP addresses, which are notoriously hard to connect with a specific individual. But CD Projekt RED say they're using a company that has methods that are 100 percent accurate.

Nowakowski says that they're being careful only to pursue cases they're certain of. "As far as I know the vast majority of people identified decided to admit to piracy and pay the compensation." He did suggest that the process was possible due to the different laws about personal information in Germany, which means that UK pirates may still be safe for now. ■

Henry Winchester

ZYNGA GOES PUBLIC

BUSINESS *FARMVILLE* DEVELOPER NOT WORTH QUITE AS MUCH AS THEY HOPED

Huge social network gaming company Zynga are not worth as many hundreds of millions as they thought they would be. The *Farmville* developers recently made their initial public offering, with their share price set at $10 a piece. But by the end of the day the share price closed at just $9.50. That figure would have been lower, too, had it not been for a 'stabilising bid' from the company's underwriters, according to Forbes. People who know about this kind of thing are making comparisons with the dot-com boom of the early 2000s, when companies went public for millions but then quickly collapsed. **HW**

DRAGON AGE III TO TAKE IDEAS FROM SKYRIM

D&D ONE DRAGON-CENTRIC RPG GETS INSPIRATION FROM ANOTHER

Dragon Age III will take influence from dragon-obsessed *Skyrim*, BioWare co-founder Ray Muzyka has said. He told Wired that he and his team were "checking *Skyrim* out aggressively", and pointed to the game's open world as a potential area of expansion for the third *Dragon Age*. "[DAIII] will have a lot of things players find compelling from games out now that have an open-world feel." But Muzyka wants to keep some of *Dragon Age II*'s best elements, hinting that the story would span over a number of years, like Hawke's Kirkwall adventure. **RM**

TRENDS

THE WORLD'S MOST EXPENSIVE DLC

Free-to-play games are becoming bloody-expensive-to-play, with developers and publishers inserting pricey items to tempt the richer members of the gaming communities. Here are some of the most wallet-emptying virtual goods.

Need for Speed World: Koenigsegg CCX Elite Edition

1 EA's free-to-play racer's line of 'Premium Elite' in-game cars kicks off with the Koenigsegg CCX Elite Edition, which will set you back a whopping $100. For that you get a polygonised version of the roadster, which retails for $540,000 in the real world. Maybe one of the *Need for Speed World* devs has just bought one.

EVE Online: Looking Glass Ocular Implant

2 The 'Looking Glass Ocular Implant' (monocle) available to *EVE*'s players costs 12,000 Aurum, 3.5 PLEX, or 1.4 billion ISK. *EVE*'s economy is complicated, but sift through the ISKs and PLEXes and you hit hard fact: that's more than $60 worth of pixels. And they do nothing better than sit on your face and show how much better you are than your chums. That'll be why the implant caused space-riots, then.

Entropia Universe: Crystal Palace Space Station

3 *Entropia Universe* is an MMO based on a virtual currency, known as 'Project Entropia Dollars' (PEDs), each worth one US dollar. Player Buzz 'Erik' Lightyear splashed out 350,000 PEDs for the Crystal Palace Space Station, which stands as the single largest virtual transaction in gaming's history. If he puts enough interesting content in, he'll probably make his money back.

2

Ten things we want to see in Elder Scrolls VI

Skyrim's success means that we'll be back in Tamriel before too long. Here's what we want from Bethesda's next free-roaming, cabbage-collecting sim

The *Elder Scrolls* series has grown enormously over its 18-year history, from its *D&D*-derivative origins in *Arena* through to the exoticism of *Morrowind* and the staggering scale of *Skyrim*. It has become one of the most distinctive and idiosyncratic fantasy settings created: what other game comes with a library of in-game books containing thousands of words?

Yet it's also a series known for bugs, compromises and imbalances – until now. *Skyrim* is a landmark game for many reasons, but chiefly because it's the first time Bethesda have made Tamriel a consistently enjoyable place to be. The *Elder Scrolls VI* is an exciting proposition because we're finally in a position to see things improved rather than fixed. Here's what we have in mind.

1 Another time, another place

One of the great appeals of the *Elder Scrolls* games is to return to a world that has been changed by events we set in motion in previous life. For *The Elder Scrolls VI*, the jump forward in time should be at least equal to the 200 years between *Skyrim* and *Oblivion*, giving the global changes brought into effect during your jaunt in the northern regions time to bed into society.

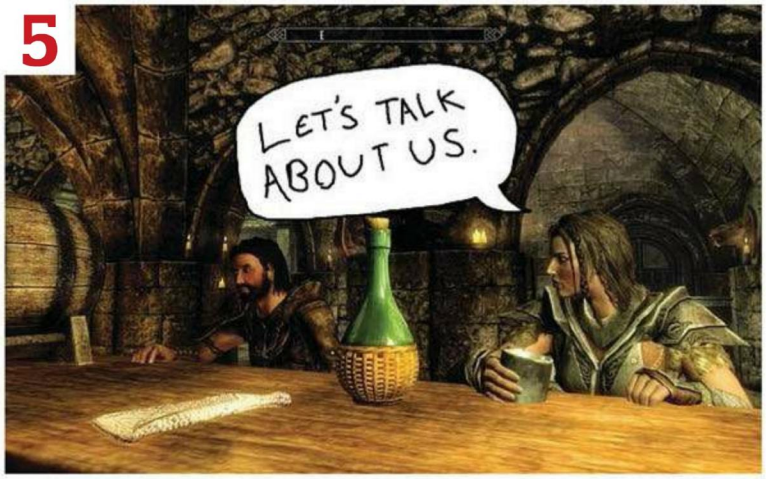
As for place, how about a return to the provinces of *TES II: Daggerfall*? That game's climactic events left the various local peoples isolated within their own territories of what was once a single land. The area is no larger than Skyrim, but contains High Rock, Orsinium, and Hammerfell – home of the Bretons, Redguard, and Orcs respectively. We want to feel like we're crossing borders as we wander the world, watching the scenery and culture change as we do so.

Probability: 2/1

2 Stranger in a strange land

Tamriel isn't Nirn's only continent, so why not abandon it entirely? We want to see *The Elder Scrolls VI: Akavir*. Akavir is the homeland of dragons and the Blades, so it offers just enough fan-favourite features to feel familiar, and is the Elder Scrolls' Asia, so there's a wealth of mythology and folklore at Bethesda's disposal. An in-game book, Disaster at Ionith, tells of an Imperial expedition that finds an unknown and unfathomable new form of sorcery out in the wastes of Akavir: here's an opportunity to explore that mystery.

Probability: 50/1



3 Give us total control

TES games are generous in how far they allow you to stretch the main narrative, but it was *Morrowind* that last trusted you enough to break it. We'd like an end to invulnerable essential characters, as long as players are warned that their death will have an impact. Should the worst happen, the story should change. Show us – rather than telling us – that killing our Blades contact for his shoes has doomed the world.
Probability: 100/1

4 Deeper, not broader

Very few people will find every dungeon, castle and ruin in Skyrim. The next *Elder Scrolls* game does not need to be geographically bigger: instead, Bethesda should focus on *stuff*. *Oblivion* and *Skyrim* both have major world events – oblivion gates, dragons – that punctuate whatever else the player might be doing. Why not expand this to include several different overlapping systems, each with their own distinct rewards? Let us fight a massive Dwemer construct in the planes of Aetherius, or something like that.
Probability: 10/1

5 Revamp followers

They repeat the same five lines of dialogue, then stare blankly as you ask them to stop bumbling through your house knocking over plates. Bethesda should give each follower BioWare-style backstories with attendant quests, conversations, and choices. Tie it to time spent with each companion to encourage players to stick with their favourites.
Probability: 18/1

6 Group combat and squad commands

The moments where *Skyrim* breaks into warfare are a hair-raising change of pace. Make larger battles more frequent, and more controllable with a range of tactical options. These could work like Shouts – instant-cast special abilities that tell your AI buddies when to charge, and what abilities to use. For balance, the AI could scale encounters based not only on your level, but how many friends you've brought with you.
Probability: 14/1

7 Rethink stealth

Sneaking in *TES* is licence to do whatever you please, and reached its peak with *Skyrim*, where a late-game perk forces NPCs' eyelines above waist level, rendering anyone who crouches invisible, even in daylight. But it's time for a change: throw out skill-based stealth in favour of a system based on light and noise.
Probability: 20/1

8 Consequences for magic

A major part of *Elder Scrolls* lore is about the various Aedra and Daedra and their involvement with the living, particularly with regard to magic, yet we rarely feel the effect of a Daedric deal. So why not restore spellcrafting, using customisable Daedric bargains with positive and negative effects? If we want to summon a giant ball of flaming lightning, fine, but to make the spell in the first place we will have to sacrifice a companion, or have a random NPC die. It's simple and should address the balancing issues that spellcrafting created.
Probability: 70/1

9 Try free-running

The basics of running and jumping haven't changed since Morrowind, and they're well overdue for a tune-up. Let's have first-person, *Mirror's Edge*-style climbing, and *Assassin's Creed*-style chases. These could be tied to skills and equipment to prevent heavily armoured knights from suddenly turning into Ezio when cornered. It'd finally justify Acrobatics, at least.
Probability: 150/1

10 Online profiles

You can't play with your friends directly, but sharing stories is a huge part of *TES*'s appeal. We'd rather Bethesda focus their attention on those experiences than tack-on a multiplayer component. That said, why not build an online journal and character sheet that tracks and writes up your progress? No need for social media integration: just let us throw our mates a link to the time we beat a dragon with an enchanted pickaxe.
Probability: 4/1 ■

YOU SUGGEST

I can't help but notice that a lot of people in-game talk about the southern Khajiit lands...
@Underwood Lynch

I'd love a return to Morrowind.
@Purpose Gaming

Elder Scrolls VI should be set in France during World War 2.
@IanHardingham

TES VI will be set in Rapture.
@NemoNaemo

SPACE.
@jongreenall

To have your say follow: @pc_gamer

THE SPY

The Spy calls it "wodka".

The last time The Spy was in Ukraine, it was August 1991 and the country had just signed its Declaration of Independence. The Spy awoke surrounded by empty bottles of vodka with three Djungarian hamsters frozen to his face. The Spy doesn't like to talk about that period of time much.

The Spy's latest mission was to revisit the place to see how they were doing, with the implicit instruction to avoid vodka and small soviet rodents. Alas, he awoke in his Kiev hotel room surrounded by bottles of vodka, but there were no hamsters to be seen. 'Phew!' wrote The Spy later, in this column.

Ukraine isn't overflowing with significant PC games developers, but it does play home to a special few. One of those is GSC Game World, creators of *Stalker* and its expansions. The team announced in 2011 that they had started work on *Stalker 2*, but The Spy subsequently heard stories of trouble afoot in the wastes of Chernobyl.

The Spy put on his spare pair of trousers, kicked away the empty vodka bottles and wandered into the freezing Kiev streets. People huddled together, muttering about the fall of the company that brought us the PC's spookiest and most ambitious first-person shooter. No one seemed to know the truth, but among the rabble of a public square, The Spy met his contact and discovered the facts: *Stalker 2* was initially being developed exclusively for the PC, but GSC needed more money to complete the game. In an effort to attract more publishers, they began work on a console version, but to no avail.

With no publisher money, the team have shut up shop. There's still some hope; the dedication of GSC is well known, and they've crawled through hard times to deliver a *Stalker* game in the past. But for now, The Spy's contact reminded him that the first *Stalker* would never have seen light of day had it not been for publishers THQ bootstrapping the developers, and disappeared into the crowds.

Saddened, The Spy hit the bottle hard. If there's no room in this world for the uncompromising vision of Ukrainian depressives, then what's the point of going on? You may as well let the cold winter take you, rather than continue to write secret gaming news.

Only an old friend could cheer The Spy up at times like these. Cliff 'Cliffy "Cliffy B" B' Bleszinski from Epic Games had always been on hand with a kind word when The Spy needed it.

Over the course of a long, rambling monologue, Cliff did impart one piece of wisdom: "It'll all be better in a Fortnite," he said. "Fortnight," The Spy corrected him, slamming down the phone. Then it hit him: like The Spy, Cliffy had the ability to imply spelling and capitalisation in speech, and those kind words were more than just a platitude. They were a new mission. The Spy picked up the phone and hit redial. "What is Fortnite?" he asked. Cliff hung up, but it had been worth a shot.

> **"Like so many things, the answer came to The Spy in a rodent"**

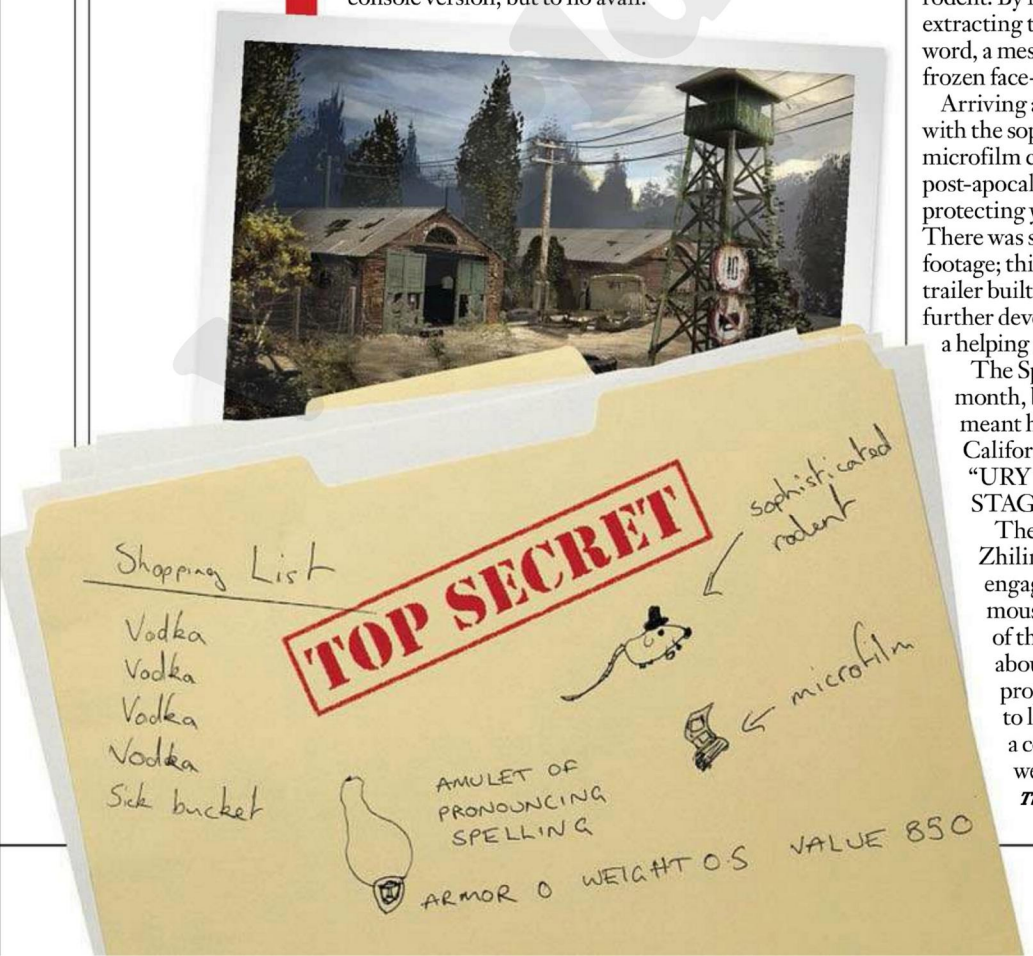
Like so many things, the answer came to The Spy in a rodent. By replaying Cliff's rambling phone call and extracting the first and third letters from every ninth word, a message became clear: hunt down one of the frozen face-hamsters, now thawed and living in Paris.

Arriving at a small cafe on the Seine, The Spy met with the sophisticated furry. He handed The Spy a microfilm containing footage of Epic's latest project, a post-apocalyptic co-op construction game about protecting yourself from monsters using barricades. There was something else, though: a smell around the footage; this game didn't exist. Not yet. This was a trailer built to attract publisher interest, to justify further development. Even the biggest developers need a helping moneyhand sometimes.

The Spy thought he was just about done for the month, but a message from Firefall developers Red 5 meant he had to change flights and head to California. The message was brief and shouty: "URY ZHILINSKY HIRED TO WORK ON STAGE 5."

The Spy knows two people by the name Ury Zhilinsky. He's either the ex-KGB assassin who engaged The Spy in a deadly game of cat-and-mouse across central Europe in the 1980s, or one of the developers behind *Crysis 2*. Little is known about Stage 5, other than that it's a cloud-based project. If it's Ury the games developer, it's sure to look gorgeous. If it's Ury the assassin, expect a cold game about smoking, drinking and wearing mustard-coloured slacks. Spy out. ■

The Spy



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INCOMING

The games to look out for, and when to expect them

Alan Wake

Remedy have made an about-turn on their supposedly Xbox-exclusive psychological horror game and announced its presence on the PC in "early 2012". The PC version will feature all six of *Alan Wake*'s original 'episodes', plus *The Signal* and *The Writer* DLCs.

Remedy have chosen to publish the game on the PC themselves. There's a certain advantage to self-publishing, in that the PC release will eschew Microsoft's intrusive and hideous Games for Window Live service in favour of Valve's Steam.

Microsoft infamously said that *Alan Wake* was better suited to a couch experience than a desktop one, which has to be the biggest speechpoo to have ever come out of Microsoft's collective mouthpiece.

If anything, the higher resolution graphics and smaller play space on the PC will make *Alan Wake* a tenser, tighter experience. So, screw you Microsoft. You know nothing.

Publisher Microsoft Game Studios
Developer Remedy

TITLE	UK ETA
Kingdoms of Amalur: Reckoning	February
Jane's Advanced Strike Fighters	February
Crusader Kings II	February
Wargame: European Escalation	February
X-Plane 10	February
Syndicate	February
The Darkness II	February
Far Cry 3	February
Alan Wake	March
Ridge Racer Unbounded	March
Max Payne 3	March
Street Fighter X Tekken	March
Mass Effect 3	March

Jagged Alliance: Back in Action	March
F1 Online: The Game	March
Gettysburg: Armored Warfare	March
J.U.L.I.A.	March
Sniper Elite V2	March
Lucius	March
Sniper: Ghost Warrior 2	March
Prototype 2	April
The Secret World	April
Aliens: Colonial Marines	April
DiRT: Showdown	May
Diablo III	Spring
Darksiders 2	June
Dishonored	Summer
Borderlands 2	June
Tomb Raider	Autumn
Planetside 2	Autumn
BioShock: Infinite	December
Hitman: Absolution	December
Brothers in Arms: Furious 4	2012

DiRT: Showdown

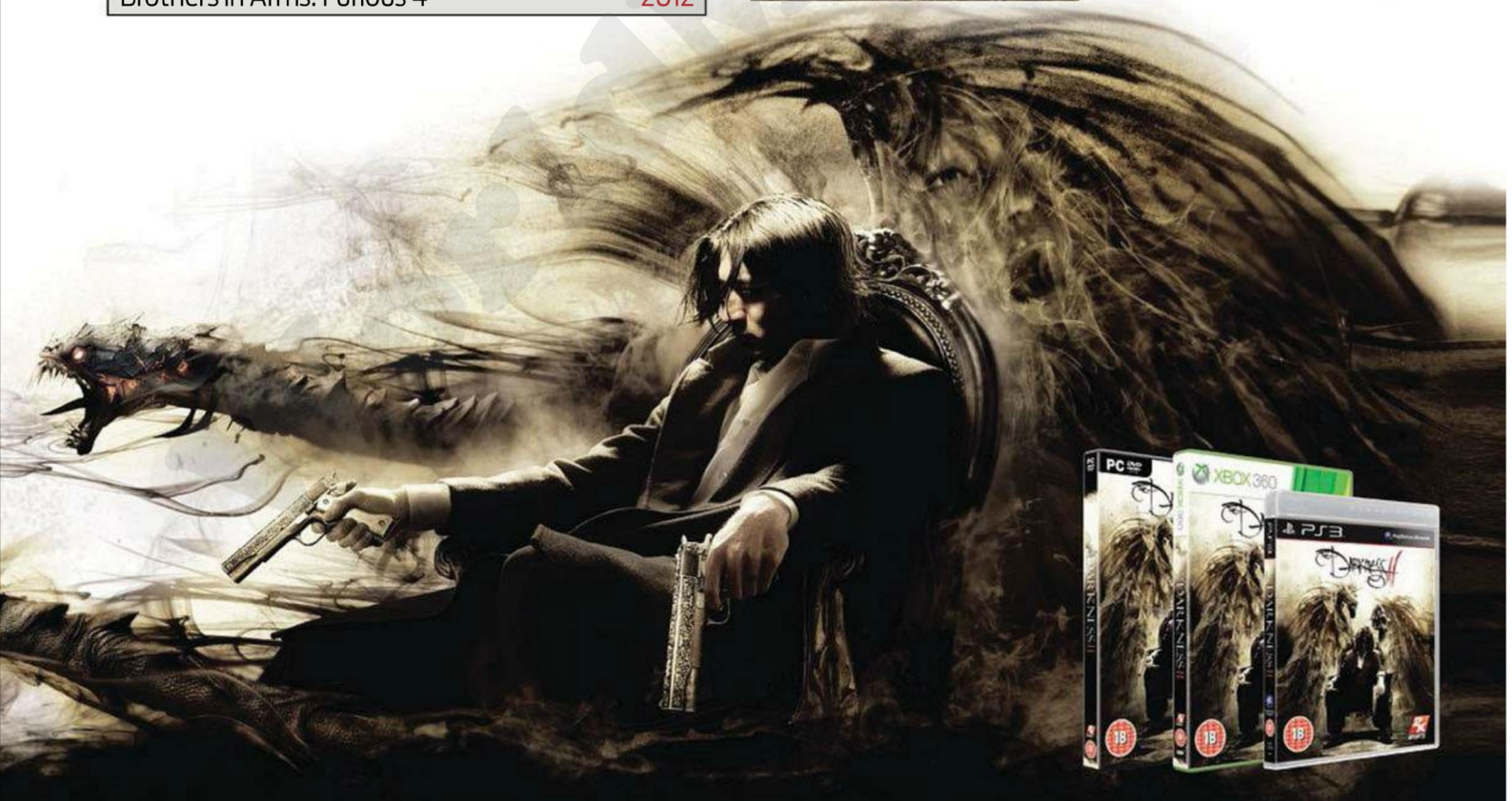
The *DiRT* series finally does the inevitable, and goes a bit stupid: *Showdown* is centred on gymkhana-style events and arena destruction derbies. Codemasters are really good at pyrotechnics and REALLY BIG 3D WORDS, but we're not sure if focusing on the smaller events is such a good idea – *DiRT 3*'s seemed to divide audiences. Also, we're still disappointed that Codies hasn't announced *GRID 2*, but rumour has it that *F1* has taken over from the ultra-clean urban racing franchise.

Publisher Codemasters
Developer In-house

BioShock Infinite

Every time we see new clips from *BioShock Infinite*, we love it just a little bit more. The latest trailer focuses on the game's new enemies, including Big Daddy predecessors known as Alphas. These guys have exposed faces, hopefully leading to some interesting, thoughtful interaction. We really like the art style as well: BioShock's cartoony palette and stylisation make this daylight nightmare all the more believable.

Publisher 2K Games
Developer Irrational Games



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18 PS3 XBOX 360. XBOX LIVE PC DVD TOP COW 2K GAMES

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THE BIG QUIZ

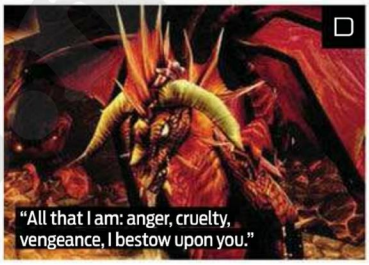
Make your way through a Blizzard of trivia

How well do you know the Azeroth auteurs?

01 Blizzard was founded as a porting house rather than a developer... but what was it called?

02 Blizzard employees are given a sword for five years' service and a shield for ten... but what do they get for fifteen?

03 *Warcraft* villains love to boast... but can you match the claim to the boss monster?



04 Which cult director is set to direct the upcoming *World of Warcraft* movie?

05 Name the adventure game Blizzard once planned, which instead became a novel and the Orc chapter of *Warcraft III*.

06 At its peak, how many subscribers did *WoW* have?

07 Blizzard vice president Chris Metzen voices several *Warcraft* characters, including two feuding leaders. Which two?

08 Which faction does the official PCG World of Warcraft Guild belong to?

09 True or false: there is an official soundtrack CD containing nothing but background music from the taverns of Azeroth.

10 *StarCraft II* will be three games, one per faction. Which is ironically due to arrive last?

11 Which *StarCraft II* unit was meant to star in her own (now cancelled) game, before being rescued for a guest appearance?

12 *StarCraft* performance is measured in APM – Actions Per Minute. How many do you need to be competitive in Korea?

13 Which model and sci-fi star replaced Glynnis Campbell as the voice of *StarCraft II*'s Kerrigan?

14 Which of these is not a hero class in *Diablo III*: Witch Doctor, Barbarian, Vanquisher, Demon Hunter?

15 *Diablo III* has real-money trading, but what is the only item players are currently permitted to buy/sell in a Blizzard game?

16 Which classic Blizzard game starred Erik the Swift, Olaf the Stout and Baelog the Fierce?

17 What fictional weapon was at the heart of South Park's excellent 'Make Love, Not Warcraft' episode?

18 What is the current name of the ever-levelling Blizzard band whose releases include Power of the Horde, Rogues Do It From Behind, and I Am Murloc?

19 What Guinness World Record did *StarCraft II* set shortly after its release?

20 What is the codename of Blizzard's next MMORPG?

ANSWERS

01 Silicon and Synapse.
02 A ring.
03 a) Illidan
b) Deathwing
c) The Lich King
d) Onyxia
04 Sam Raimi.
05 *Lord of the Clans.*
06 11.5 million subscribers.
07 King Varian Wrynn (Alliance) and Thrall (Horde).
08 Horde. Join today!
09 True.
10 Protoss.
11 Nova (*StarCraft: Ghost*).
12 300+.
13 Tricia Helfer.
14 Vanquisher.
15 The Guardian Cub, in *World of Warcraft*.
16 *The Lost Vikings.*
17 The Sword of a Thousand Truths.
18 The Artists Formerly Known As Level 80 Tauren Chieftain.
19 Best Selling Strategy Game For A PC.
20 *Titan.*

HOW DID YOU DO?

RATE YOUR BLIZZARD BRILLIANCE HERE

0-5 Undead

6-10 Gnome

11-15 Goblin

16-19 Blood Elf

20 That Which Has No Life

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PC GAMER **Special Report**

Three-pronged approach to save driving sims

Racing sims may have stalled, but three developers are each trying new ways to make the genre go faster

It's hard not to feel that PC racing simulations are in the same position that flight sims were in a few years ago – put bluntly, they're not a very attractive proposition for publishers.

There's a sense that the state of the art hasn't moved on substantially in some time and, while PCs are naturally the best place to perform the vast amount of data chewing required to replicate vehicle dynamics, it's actually on the consoles (with the help of massive budgets) that breakthroughs are being made. It's not all grim news though: three established but independent racing game developers are working on projects designed to save the PC racing sim – and each of them has a slightly different approach to the problem.

One of them is Slightly Mad Studios, the team behind the glossy but unashamedly hardcore *Shift 2: Unleashed*. After the deal with EA ended, the developers were left without a publishing contract and an uncertain future. Their solution? Ask for help.

The *Community Assisted Racing Simulation* (www.wmdportal.com/projects/cars), or *CARS* to give it its ever so convenient acronym, invites members of the community to invest in, advise on and even develop for the fully featured commercial racing simulator in return for a cut of the revenue when it's released. The idea is to produce a game that's laser-guided to the hearts of racing fans, but it's not without its risks as well: 'when it's released' still feels extremely speculative, for instance.

"*CARS* invites its members to invest in, advise on and even develop the game"

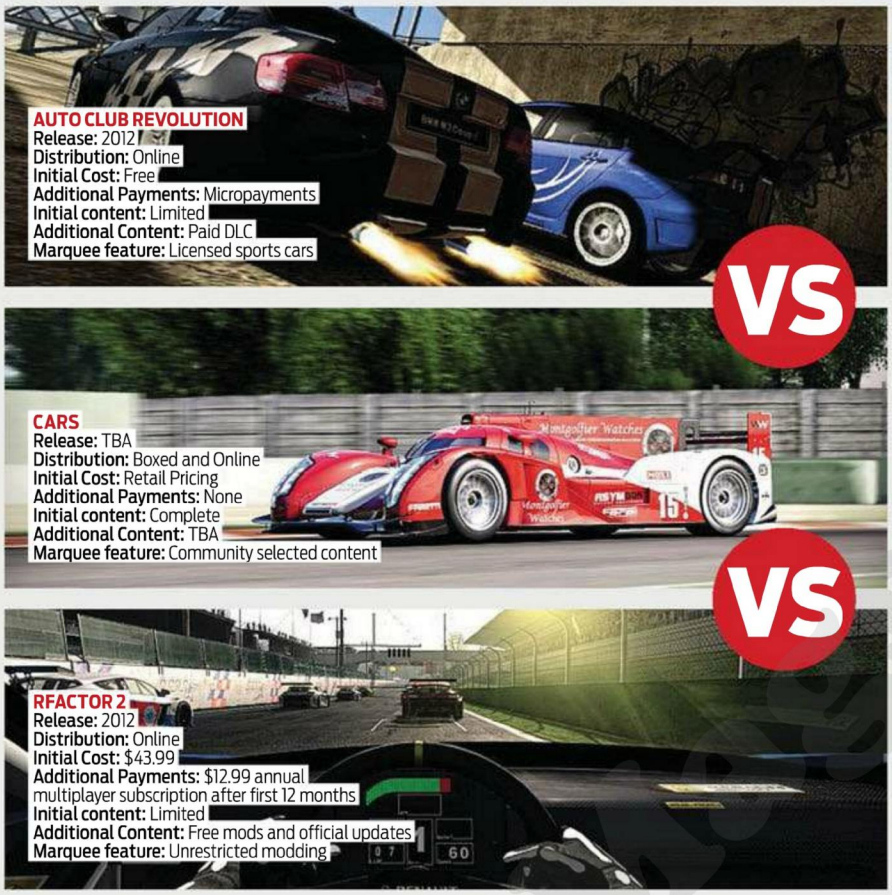
"Creating any game without the back-up and funding of a big publisher is a big risk. There's no guarantee of payment at the end of each month, and it also takes a bit more persuading on the licensing side," producer Suzy Wallace agrees. "But there's also lots of scope for us to focus on what we think is important, rather than some executive at a publishers. It's been a learning process for us as a team as well."

In this case 'we' refers to the fact that Slightly Mad is dedicated to aligning its intentions with the community's wishes. "You need an effective way of listening," Wallace asserts. "While our own work processes utilise a forum system similar to that used for *CARS*, we have a pretty organised system where everybody knows exactly what to post where. Listening to thousands of voices speaking at once, all from different places, has been a tougher issue to overcome than we expected."

Another developer that takes advantage of a community that is happy to build its own fun, but in a slightly different fashion, is ISI.

Mike says...
CARS's shared revenue model is the riskiest of the three, but could be Slightly Mad's best chance of survival post-EA. *rFactor 2* gives detail-obsessed modders top-end simulation tools, and *Auto Club Revolution* is free. Any one of them could change the face of sim racing.

CAR VS CAR VS CAR The three sims compared



Having developed the engine that powered the *GTR* games and EA's now ancient *F1* efforts, ISI struck out on their own with *rFactor*, which turned the potent engine into a welcoming platform for modders.

Entirely flexible and shipping with a minimal amount of fictional content to whet the appetite, the game was embraced by a community that was happy to build decades' worth of motorsport history across multiple disciplines, just for the pleasure of driving the vehicles and circuits. With *rFactor* looking increasingly creaky, *rFactor* 2 (www.rfactor.net) aims to offer not just more sophisticated visuals, but also a far more advanced baseline physics model, which allows for tyre deflection and flat spotting, and in-built systems to help with compatibility between players.

"While it is possible to modify other racing titles, we believe the community will find *rFactor 2* a much friendlier and more supportive platform for modding than was even found with our first title, *rFactor*," says ISI's Tim Wheately. "As end-users, users of mods, it's also going to be a much easier experience installing those mods. We do not manage or control the mods, but we now allocate IDs and use these IDs to make sure everyone has the same version number. It takes away the mismatch issues commonly found with software mods."

Community developed sim *CARS* has the looks and the physics to succeed.

Of course, *rFactor 2*'s unspoken advantage is that, with modders creating content, ISI can wash its hands of the licensing and copyright issues surrounding, say, inclusion of next year's Formula One cars and circuits – something that's almost an inevitability once modders get on board. It's entirely likely that *rFactor 2* will have more content than a player could reasonably expect to experience during the game's lifespan.

Eutechnyx's *Auto Club Revolution* (autoclubrevolution.com) offers almost the opposite. It's free to play and relies heavily on the sort of licensed content you'd expect from a high-budget console title. In fact, the game's website boasts of 'console quality gameplay', something that's liable to wind up sim-heads.

"Yes, we remember writing that comment, much to the dismay of many of our hardcore PC game-playing beta testers," laughs executive producer Doug Wolff. "What we were trying to impart was that a player can expect the quality of a Triple A Xbox 360 or PlayStation 3 game, delivered on a web-based platform and for free.

"We don't mean that *Auto Club Revolution* will be a console game, although you can use a console controller to play if you like."

Of course the burning question is how much will be offered gratis and how much will be tagged with micropayments. "Free content includes selected cars, race tracks and performance upgrades," Wolff offers. "Our plans are to allow use of all the game's core features by non-paying players, but provide some cool additional elements that players will want to buy."

It's performance upgrades that will be the contentious issue: if spending more real-world money offers a competitive advantage in online races, it could poison the community from the outset.

Whichever of the three avenues most appeals to you, it's clear that the genre isn't in as dire need of defibrillation as perhaps it first appeared. All three of these titles are currently in a playable state, and *rFactor 2* and *Auto Club Revolution* can both be reasonably expected to break cover in 2012. As the old adage definitely doesn't go, you wait for a decent racing sim and then three come along at once. ■

Mike Channell

Dota 2's heroes are beautifully modelled, particularly the Tide Hunter (bottom).

DOTA 2

PLAYED IT Understanding Valve's complex, fascinating action RTS.

Valve's main goal with *Dota 2*, says producer Erik Johnson, was "to build a sequel to a game that 20-odd million people around the world are playing".

That's *Defence of the Ancients*, a free player-made map for *Warcraft III*. It set out the template for a strange genre of game that's since inspired a series of massive commercial releases. *League of Legends* alone has over 11 million active players, more than *World of Warcraft*.

Dota 2 sticks to the template closely: two teams of up to five players each pick a hero, and control it from a top-down perspective. But there's already a war going on, between computer-controlled soldiers called creeps. Players are far more powerful, so creeps mainly provide easy kills to boost their experience and gold.

Each hero picks and improves skills as they level up during the game, and spends money earned from their kills on magical equipment and potions. In other words, there's a very short-term RPG unfolding on top of this RTS battle. And that progression is vital, because both team's bases are protected by devastating static defence.

Early on, assault is impossible. As heroes level up over the course of a game – which is typically 30-45 minutes – they can start to make a dent in enemy defences by grouping up and taking down gun towers.

"It's slow for an action game, fast for an RPG, and more focused than an RTS. It's an action RTS"

It's slow for an action game, fast for an RPG, and more focused than an RTS. Valve call it an action RTS. "It pushes how well you can think about the state of a very complex system moment to moment," says Erik. "How well you can make good *decisions* moment to moment."

Playing it, it's funny how similar the feel of *Dota 2* is to *Warcraft III*. Valve are sticking closely to *Defence of the Ancients*, and *DotA* wasn't even a mod: it just gave new names and values to the combat mechanics of Blizzard's game. So while *Dota 2* is gorgeously presented and visually crisp, normal attacks still involve two creatures standing next to each other playing swiping animations while health bars go down. It might be an action RTS, but it doesn't feel like an action game in the way the fluid carnage of *Diablo III* does.

It's a long, hard game of attrition and tactics. There's always an enemy force ahead that you can't handle, and it's about biding your time, improving your character and defending your territory while you look for an opportunity to push. Killing an enemy hero is a huge win, so players often dance around each other amid the fray: eager to dish damage but skittish about getting trapped. Denying the enemy experience and gold is so important that some players kill their own creeps and defences before the enemy can, robbing them of the payoff.

What makes that complicated dance particularly interesting is the diversity of the heroes themselves. There are already

READ ME
PUBLISHER Valve
DEVELOPER In-house
LINK www.DotA2.com

Valve's art style is based around making hectic fights readable.

Heroes need to group up to push into enemy territory.

more than sixty to choose from, and there'll be many more before launch. Each has a small set of skills that define your role on the team. The arachnid Broodmother, for example, can spin huge webs on the battlefield that render her invisible and heal her. She can push steadily into enemy territory, making it harder for the enemy to hold and safer for her and the spiderlings she can hatch. The zombie Lifestealer, meanwhile, is a scrappy tank-killer: almost all of his skills involve chomping at enemies to restore his health while he drains theirs. His ultimate ability lets him burrow his whole body into any non-hero unit and eat them from the inside out - gaining all of their health and ambushing unsuspecting enemies.

The huge variety of playstyles and the complex systems they fit into earned *DotA* some fans at Valve. "A group of people in the office were playing *DotA* a lot," says Erik, "and initially became a fan just of the game. And then we went through some update cycles as customers of IceFrog, and we became pretty big fans of his."

IceFrog didn't invent the genre, or even *DotA*. He took over maintaining the game from Steve Feak, who left to make *League of Legends*. But it was the happy feedback loop that he'd created with the *DotA* community that impressed Valve.

"In a lot of ways [it] kind of mimics the way we think about building audiences over time," says Erik, "where you're continuously delivering value to your customers, continuously changing the game, making it more interesting and adding content. So part of it is this lifeline to the developer that we've done over the years, with *Team Fortress 2* and *Counter-Strike*."

"Denying the enemy experience and gold is so important that some kill their own creeps"

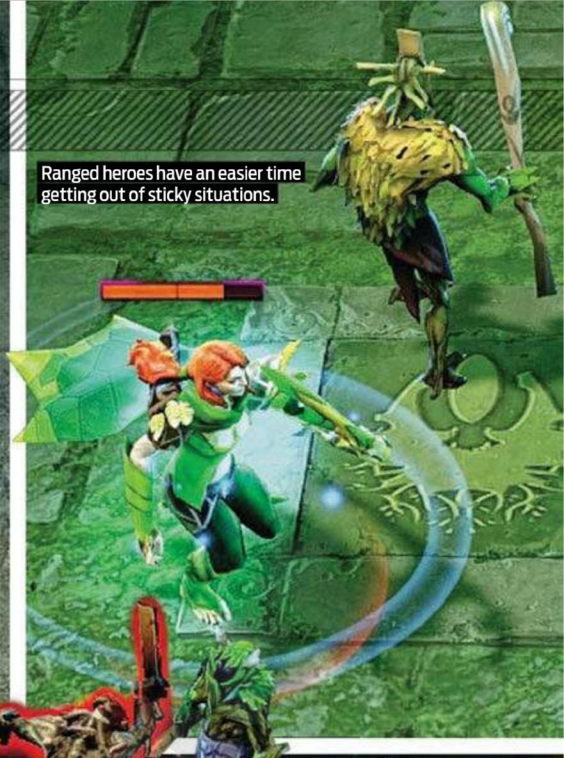
So they hired IceFrog to develop a sequel with a team at Valve. It's a game completely unlike any other they've made: it's their first fantasy game, their first strategy game, and their first RPG. But they're not interested in diluting any of those things to make it appeal to a new audience – for now, at least, Valve are primarily interested in making something for the *DotA* community.

That doesn't mean it'll be the same game, of course. "Part of our job is figuring out how to recognise when consensus is reached within the community, and also recognise when it's time for us to take risks," says Erik. "It could be that it's going to take some amount of time for the community to be comfortable with a particular change."

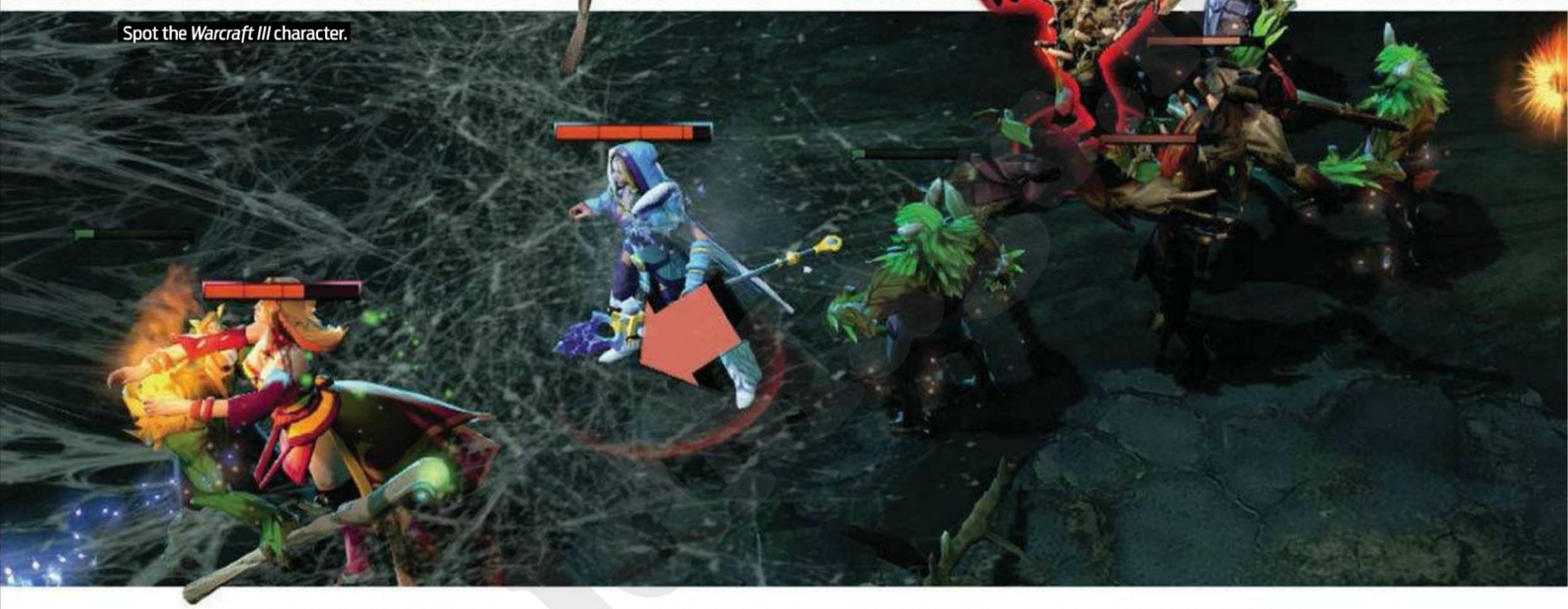
Some of those changes won't be to the game itself, Erik says. "There are a bunch of things outside the product that are very challenging for a *DotA 1* player right now. Like how to get in and play a match with a bunch of your friends against similarly skilled opponents. That's one of the problems that we're going to solve."

Dota 2 is intensely teamwork-heavy: if one player on your five-man team is well below your skill level, their deaths will give the other team a steady stream of experience and gold that can turn into ▸

The Radiant faction send little tree-men at the enemy.



Ranged heroes have an easier time getting out of sticky situations.



Spot the *Warcraft III* character.

a huge lead. So most *DotA*-type games have a reputation for being unwelcoming to new players. Jump into a random game, and your learning experience might be ruining a whole 40-minute game for up to nine other people.

As well as adding better matchmaking, Valve plan to incentivise the community to address this problem themselves. "We want a build a structure where the community can self-police things like that," says Erik. "We're right in the middle of generating all the data on how that's working, and we'll see how that goes. We think it's a solvable problem.

"[Putting] a new player into a position where they can have a bunch of fun learning the game is something that's important to us. And we have loads of ideas of how to do that. Some of them rely on people having friends that are playing already, so they can coach them or teach them the game within the product, and we think that's one way to do it. There's a way that we can put the new player into a really safe place. There are bots that they can play against to learn the game that way. And there's matchmaking: we want new players to be learning at the same pace as other players.

"How does the community interact with each other so that everyone stays civil? We're kind of testing that out now, where players have the ability to report other players in the game for a variety of things that they're doing, good or bad."

"We're testing how the community can interact with each other so that everyone stays civil"

Understanding the game is important, but getting good at it doesn't have to be. "We don't want *Dota 2* players to have this goal of moving up in skill as much as they can," Erik explains. "The goal of *DotA* is to have really entertaining matches."

The current build of *Dota 2* does little to explain itself, but it's still a game you want to get into, simply because it's gorgeous. The battlefield is shaded in pastels, lush grass and grey rock painted with the same low-contrast palette. The heroes are big, colourful, diverse characters with sharp outlines and distinctive shapes. There are already 63 to choose from, so being able to tell them apart is understandably a priority. Adding new ones is one of the main ways *DotA* games typically evolve after release.

"There's a really strong functional component to why the game looks the way it does, because *DotA* is a game where you're looking at your own hero the entire time, which is different from all the first-person shooters," Erik says. "So we wanted to make the thing that you're looking at interesting – something you want to spend 45 minutes looking at, thinking it looks cool."

"On the functional side, when things happen in *Dota 2*... in the span of five seconds you could have 20 different elements on the screen, of varying importance. And we need to be able to have players understand what's going on and be able to visually break down what's happening at any given moment."

It's set in the same world as *DotA 1*,

Bright clear characters, subdued backdrop. Good work, art people.

Bots are decent enough to learn the basics with.

Rogue monsters can be slain by either side for experience and gold.

which gave new names, abilities and backstories to characters that used Blizzard's *Warcraft III* art. It wasn't a fully realised fiction, so Valve have been fleshing it out with comics and new histories for each hero.

"This is the first fantasy game that we've made at Valve," Erik says, "which I'm sure a lot of the artists on the team are really excited about... so we wanted to have at least a fresh take on fantasy."

"We didn't want to do the typical Northern European fantasy look to the game. While there are elements of that type of fantasy that we think are interesting, we want to pull from sources from all around the world and try to make those all fit together. So there are elements of Eastern fantasy in the game, and South American fantasy, and all different parts of the world – *DotA* is a very international product."

While a lot of *Dota 2*'s hero characters look fresh, it's not hard to tell which *Warcraft III* characters some of them were originally based on. Pudge, for example, is a fat, stitched-up zombie recognisably similar to the Abomination – and sure enough, he used that very model in *DotA*. The *Dota 2* version has the same concept, shape, and the same two weapons in the same two hands. Even if it were an unrelated game, parities like this would be suspicious. When you can also trace such a clear causal line from Blizzard's art to what has ended up in Valve's game, it just seems wrong.

"Valve have been fleshing the world out with comics and new histories for each hero"

Blizzard are working on their own version of *DotA*, featuring a motley crew of characters from all their major games, from Siege Tanks to Orcs. Both games will inevitably be compared with *League of Legends*, the hugely successful free-to-play *DotA* game from Riot. But Erik says Valve don't see it as a direct competition. "My impression of the *League of Legends* community is that they're very happy and they're big fans of Riot, the developer that's delivering the value to them. Like all games, their fans are extremely attached to that product."

It is also a rare example of free-to-play done right: players can pay for access to new heroes, but these need to be balanced for the game to work in the first place so they're not getting an outright advantage.

Valve say they haven't even decided how *Dota 2* will make money. "The hard thing with any game is how to build a product so a bunch of people out there want to spend their very limited entertainment time playing it," Erik explains. "Once you have that, figuring out how to provide value and generate revenue is easier."

Right now, *Dota 2* is still a hard game to get into if you're not an experienced *DotA* player, but it's a beautiful rendition of it for those who are. It'll be interesting to see if Valve can figure out how to make it accessible and appealing to new players. It's a complex, tactical game, but they're among the best in the industry at making the tricky seem intuitive. ■

Tom Francis

City textures recall American cities like Chicago and New York.

The cities themselves look incredible.

Coastlines have also had a major upgrade.

Military aircraft are fully represented in *X-Plane 10*.

X-PLANE 10

FIRST LOOK The world's most realistic flight sim looks to make a better world.

While studying aerospace engineering at university, *X-Plane* creator Austin Meyer hit a problem with the version of *Microsoft Flight Simulator* he was using: the instrument panel on his Piper Archer II light aircraft didn't match the real one he was used to.

His solution was to start again from first principles: to build a new simulator, from the ground up, that would better reflect his experience of flight. "I knew that Microsoft wouldn't change their instrument panel just to satisfy me, so I wrote *X-Plane* to practise with a layout that was exactly right for the airplane I was flying at the time."

Twenty years later, *X-Plane* has grown to include hundreds of aircraft and thousands of miles of terrain. The heart of the series has always been a unique physics engine that models the properties of aircraft to an incredibly granular level.

"When you design an airplane for *X-Plane* you don't tell it how fast the airplane goes," Meyer explains. "You only tell *X-Plane* what the airplane is shaped like, how much it weighs, how the mass is distributed, how much the controls move, how fast the propeller moves – how much horsepower goes in to that propeller."

By starting from the basics, *X-Plane* manages to simulate the behaviour of real aircraft to an incredible degree of accuracy.

"The unique physics engine models the properties of aircraft to an incredible level"

In comparative tests, the software agrees with many flight parameters with just a 5 per cent margin of error – well within the range of natural variation between two real aircraft of the same type. Meyer is proud of what he has achieved. "When people play *X-Plane* and it's within 5 per cent of the real thing, guess what? That flight model is where it needs to be."

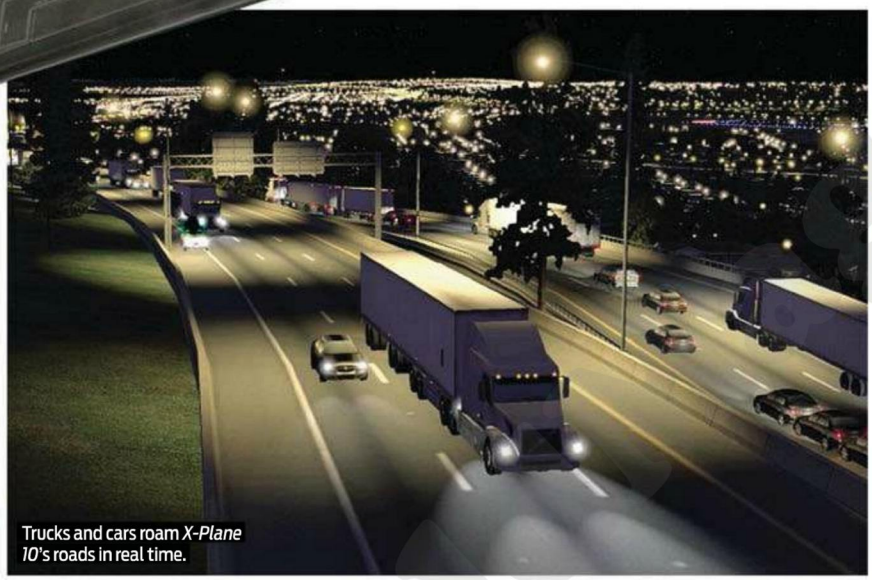
From *X-Plane 9* to *X-Plane 10* only a small number of tweaks have been made to the physics engine itself. Instead, the focus has been on improving presentation and addressing a long-running issue with the series' topography.

"*X-Plane* has developed a reputation as a simulator that has an incredible flight model and incredible framerates but really bland scenery," says Meyer. Since being released in the USA in December, *X-Plane* has experienced a steady rise in sales, unusual in a hobbyist market like flight simulation. Meyer attributes the change not to increased accessibility but to the new environmental engine. "Even though it's no more accessible than *X-Plane 9*, people love what they're seeing so much that they're willing to get in and learn the new system."

The received wisdom on flight sim landscapes is that satellite photography provides the best, most realistic approximation of the world. Meyer disagrees, which is why he has abandoned the practice entirely for *X-Plane 10*. Other developers, he says, "get so obsessed with how many pixels per metre their elevation map or their texture map is, that they

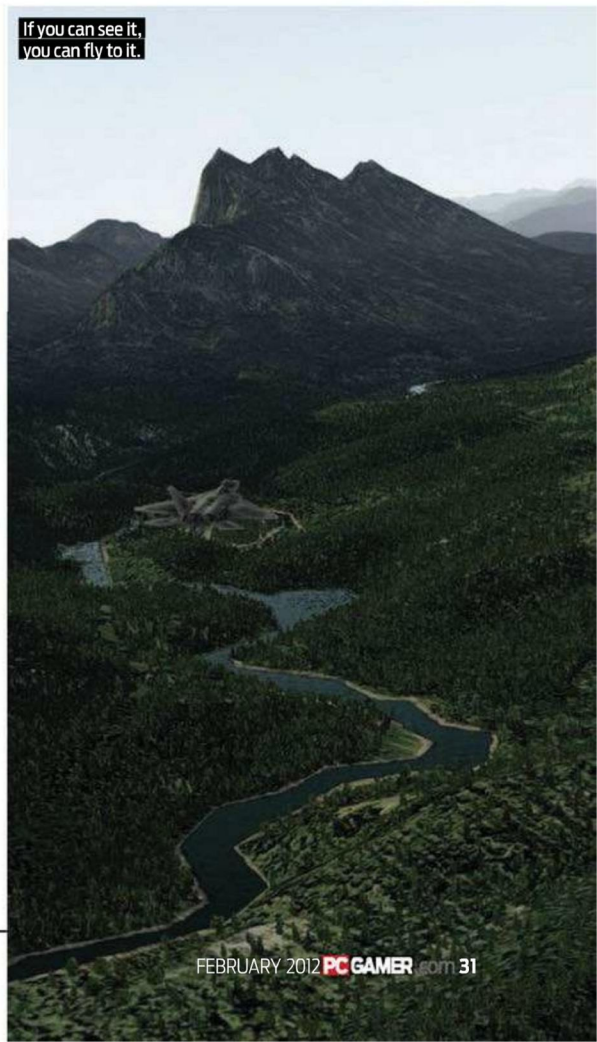
READ ME
PUBLISHER
Laminar Research
DEVELOPER
In-house
LINK
x-plane.com

The range of vehicles is constantly being expanded thanks to a dedicated community.



Trucks and cars roam *X-Plane 10*'s roads in real time.

Getting one of these up in the air takes practice and skill.



If you can see it, you can fly to it.

forget that what they have is the roof of a WalMart painted onto the ground. If I walked out on to the road and I saw the roofs of cars painted completely flat in two dimensions, I would think I was in a Twilight Zone episode. I would start freaking out!"

Publisher Laminar Research's solution was to build an algorithm that could dynamically generate plausible urban environments based on open-source road data. The system analyses the angles and positioning of roads to figure out what they are and how they relate to one another. Then, urban areas are dynamically populated with buildings, car parks, and street lighting.

After that, vehicles are added – trucks and cars that can be seen moving across a road network that, while not identical to the real world, is at least a convincing approximation of it. Absolute realism isn't the aim: instead, *X-Plane* 10 shoots for plausibility.

It's something Meyer is passionate about. "It needs to be a world where there are no rendering errors. Where everything is actually three dimensional, persistent and believable. Where things that should move, move."

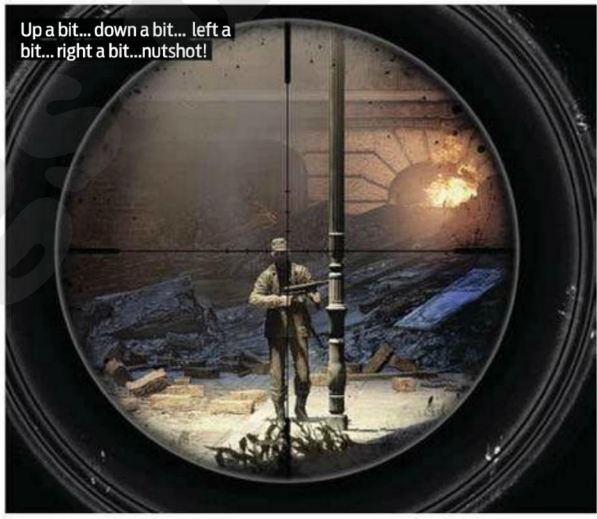
Not relying on aerial photography also allows the visual fidelity of the ground to be far higher – in addition to dynamically generated cities, expect fully rendered forests and mountain ranges. Cruising across the Pacific Northwest at dusk, I'm struck by the sense of a tangible connection between the lights on my passenger jet and those I can see on the ground. As illusory as it may be, I no longer feel like I'm simply steering an empty vehicle around a featureless void – I'm flying a plane. Badly, as it happens.

Meyer has a few suggestions for people looking to improve their flying. "Take an airplane – any airplane you want – put it up at ten, twenty, thirty thousand feet, take all of the fuel out of the tanks and see if you can touch down on a runway and stop before you run off the end. It's a fun challenge that will really enhance your understanding of aerodynamics and improve your piloting skills as well." ■

Chris Thursten

Release MARCH

Sniper's Berlin has been painstakingly recreated.



Up a bit... down a bit... left a bit... right a bit...nutshot!

SNIPER ELITE V2

FIRST LOOK Meet the psychopaths who blew the balls off the Nazis.

Sniper Elite was, in the words of Rebellion's CEO and creative director Jason Kingsley, a game "many more people have heard of than actually played." The tactical third-person shooter was set during World War II, with the player sneaking and sniping his way through the Nazi army while trying to discover the secrets of the atomic bomb.

You're peering down that same sniper's gun sights this time around, but now World War II is drawing to a close. The Nazis are almost defeated, the Soviets have invaded Germany, and it's V2 rockets that you're investigating this time around – hence the name. "[The end is] the most interesting part of any war," quips Steve Hart, *Sniper Elite V2*'s producer. "You're just this lone wolf engaging two separate armies for your own gain."

READ ME
PUBLISHER Rebellion
DEVELOPER In-house
LINK www.rebellion.co.uk

Since the first game was released in 2005, manshoots have fallen in love with modern combat. For publisher Rebellion though, the WWII setting remained a perfect fit. "It's one of the more modern wars where it's clear who the enemy are, and it's a just fight," says Kingsley. Vietnam, Korea and the Gulf War were touted, but the blurriness of just who the good guys are in these conflicts made Rebellion stick to the good old bad days.

Rebellion are keen to stay away from the entrenched, closed level design that defines modern shooters in favour of more open levels. The pre-alpha build I saw was set in crumbling Berlin, with multiple paths the player is free to move between. When you've found your angle of approach, you'll take out most enemies in the same way: lift scope, and shoot them in the head.

"Rebellion are keen to stay away from the closed level design that defines modern shooters"

It's here that *Sniper Elite V2* plays its trump card, with a close-up X-ray vision of the bullet shattering vertebrae or ripping the crown off the bad guy's head. It's giddily gory stuff, and it's procedurally generated so no two bullet hits are the same. Hart's team have seen about 125 animations, but they reckon there are over 500 ways for the bad guys to get hit by a bullet.

Rebellion haven't stopped at necks and heads. They've gone to the extent of including testicles in the X-ray animation. If you shoot them in just the right way – presumably from behind while they're on all fours – their man-eggs will rupture and split open. No one has fetishised the effects of bullet on body like this since *Soldier of Fortune*, and it's equally as discomforting.

Those nutshots, which are sure to guarantee the game's infamy, aren't the only thing that'll change each time you play. The AI will respond differently to threats depending on where you're coming from, and multiple routes ensure you'll always find a different way of approaching them.

Despite Rebellion's colourful take on combat, the team are keen to ensure that the setting and events are as realistic as possible, pointing out that snipers were – and are – the most horrible people in any war. "They're mad, quite sick," says Hart.

Locations, weapons, vehicles, uniforms and other details are all spot on.

Shoot him in the face before he can get a bead on your testes...

Wolfgang's car not passing its M.O.T. was the least of his problems

"And this is why they ate alone – even their own hated them."

Those snipers employed cruel tactics that are readily available in the game. Shoot a soldier in the leg, and he'll lie there screaming as his comrades come to rescue him. "Shall I shoot now?" asks Hart. "No, I'll just wait. Let's give them that sense of hope. And just as they're about to come in – now! – and you get that epic kill cam."

Sniper Elite V2 will be self-published by Rebellion on the PC, which Kingsley reckons will bring in more money for the company as well as providing a fluid experience for PC gamers. "It's frustrating as a developer and a game player to not be able to change something that you know needs changing," says Kingsley. "We can now, and we are going to be supporting it."

Although the sniper genre is intrinsically limited, it's a good match for Rebellion, who can put all their efforts into a polished experience. It's a nice riposte to current shooters too, with Rebellion returning to the battlegrounds where *Call of Duty* and *Battlefield* were conceived. ■

Henry Winchester

Release MARCH

Weapons and armour are suitably over the top.

"Let's stand firm, lads. Lads?"

Helmets with eye-holes are for losers.

KINGDOMS OF AMALUR RECKONING

PLAYED IT Trounce Tuatha and beat up Balor in this action-heavy RPG.

Jumping into the shoes of a mid-level character, I find this isn't quite the RPG I was expecting. A major set-piece battle – the siege of Mel Senshir – is well underway by the time my magic-wielding elf lady arrives. The forces of good are holding out against the Tuatha: nasty looking bald chaps in gunmetal armour with spiky red pauldrons. Baddies, then.

A 'Destiny' system stands in for classes, enabling you to switch between different sets of bonuses on the fly. I'm an Acolyte – a mage who can teleport short distances – but I've been kitted out with stealth and melee skills as well. Destinies are tied to your progress through three talent trees – Might, Finesse and Sorcery – but there's plenty of room for customisation, too.

As it happens, I'm not sure how useful stealth is likely to be: I'm wielding a pair of enormous chakrams (bladed discs) that crackle with mystical lightning, my hands stream with poisonous energy, and I'm surrounded by a glimmering magical shield. I'm a walking rave.

Combat is more *Darksiders* than *Diablo*, a combo system tied to timed button presses and an energy bar – 'Fate' – that can be used to trigger slow-mo finishing moves. I use a charged attack to send my chakrams whirling around each fight like Tron discs,

"My character rams a spear of spirit energy in the Balor's eye. The siege of Mel Senshir is over."

before switching to my secondary weapon – a pair of flaming glaives – to dash in and finish off enemies in close combat. Magic attacks range from a lightning blast that paralyses to a fan of throwing knives and freezing landmines.

Then I'm attacked by Todd MacFarlane's Tuesday afternoon.

The creator of the Spawn comic books is *Reckoning*'s art director, and his influence shows in the cyclopean monster, a Balor, that lurches towards the battlements. It's a vast, one-eyed green slug with insectile talons, rows of shark's teeth, and a powerful ocular laser that strikes when the chap riding him lifts an enormous blindfold. What began as a health-bar-whittling scrap has become a boss battle, of the pattern-memorising, attack-dodging sort.

At the climax, I'm treated to a 'Fateshifting' finishing move. A quick-time event triggers: my character pins the Balor with bolts of spectral ice from the heavens, before ramming a giant spear of spirit energy in the monster's eye.

The siege of Mel Senshir is over. There's a loading screen, then I'm standing in the middle of a town square packed with vendors and NPCs. In front of me is a man with a great big yellow exclamation mark above his head. In the space of a load, the game has transitioned from linear brawler to zone-based singleplayer MMO. It's a jarring change of pace, but also an interesting one: despite the clichéd fantasy trappings, there are a lot of ideas churning beneath *Reckoning*'s surface. ■

Chris Thursten

READ ME

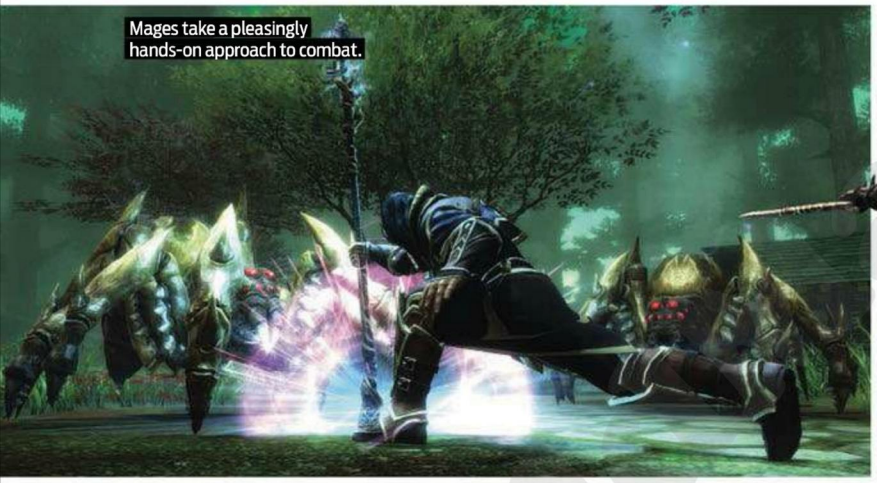
PUBLISHER
Electronic Arts

DEVELOPER
38 Studios and Big Huge Games

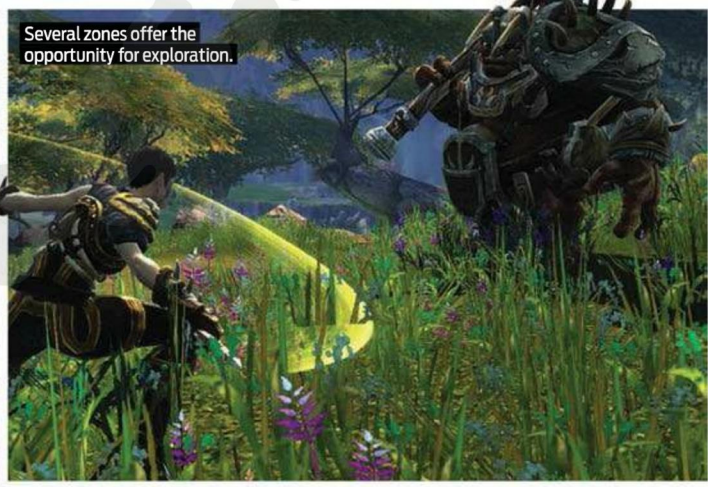
LINK
reckoning.amalur.com

Release FEBRUARY 10

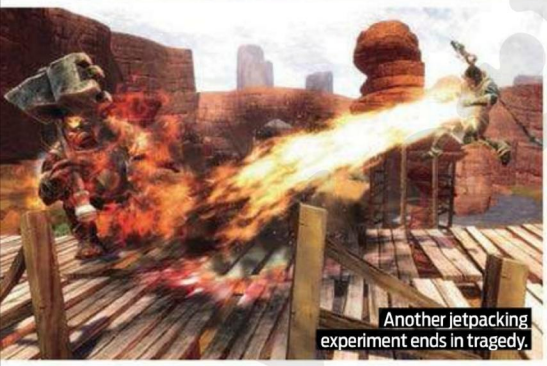
Amalur isn't short on spectcular special effects.



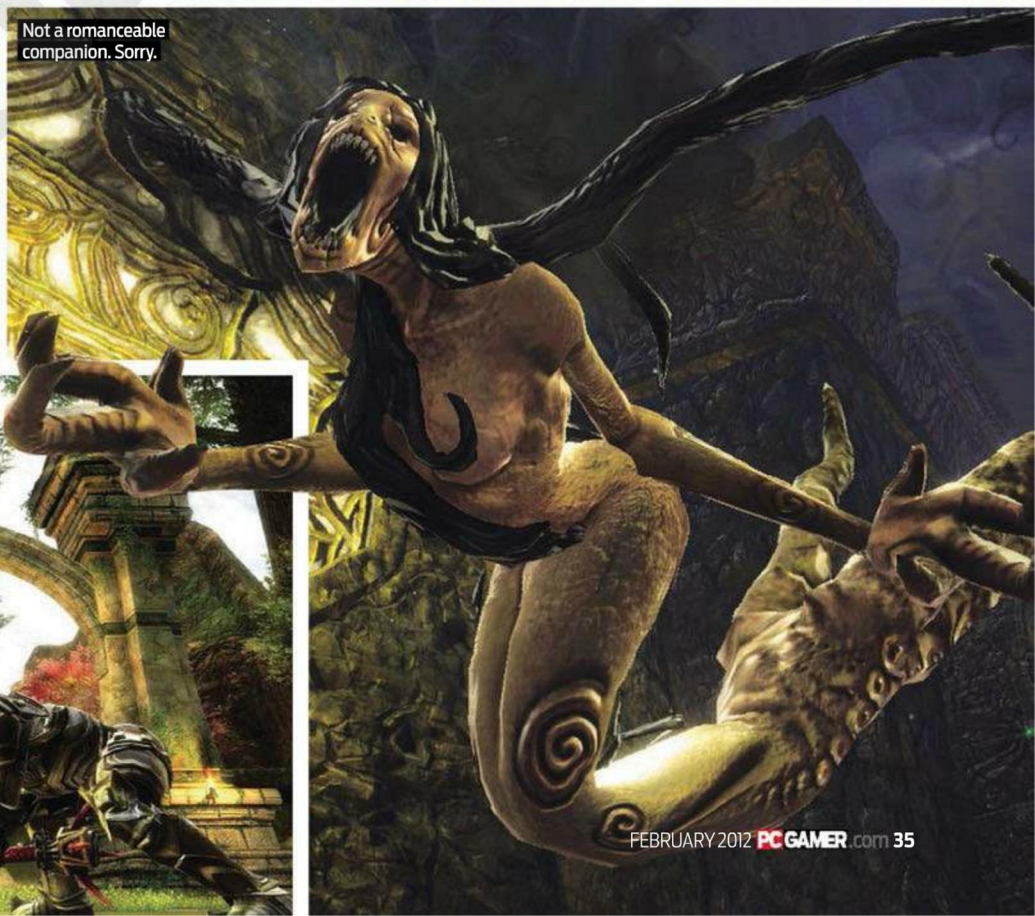
Mages take a pleasingly hands-on approach to combat.



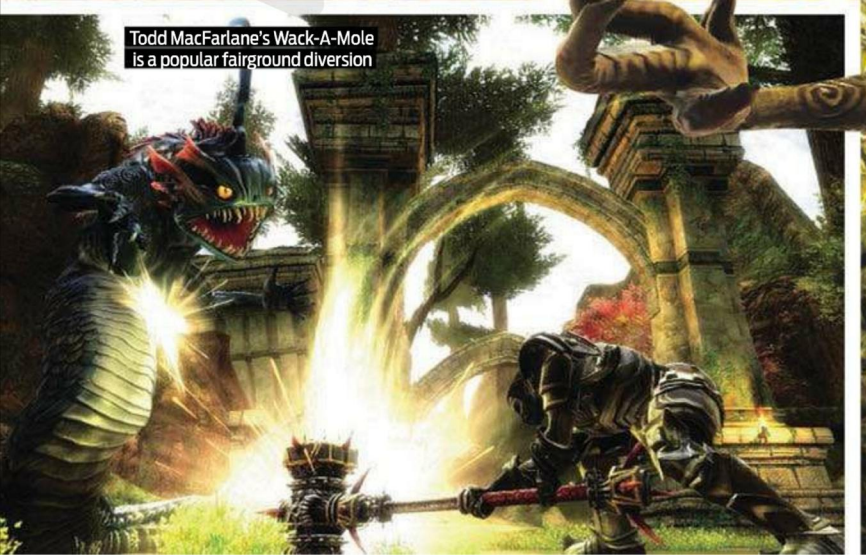
Several zones offer the opportunity for exploration.



Another jetpacking experiment ends in tragedy.



Not a romanceable companion. Sorry.



Todd MacFarlane's Wack-A-Mole is a popular fairground diversion

PREVIEW

In combat, you can see inside the enemy ship.

The devs plan to add new ships to captain.

Most encounters give you decisions to make.

FASTER THAN LIGHT

PLAYED IT Guide the tiny crew of a fragile ship across a random universe

Slave traders! And they're jerks! They demand I hand over one of my crew, and I'm not nearly well equipped enough to take them in a fight. I have no choice. We draw straws, and Jack goes. Sniff. Jaaack!

FTL is a randomised space adventure in which you manage a ship and her crew, jumping from star to star. Your first encounter could be a free weapon, or a bunch of slave-trading lamewads. And losing a crew member is a big deal: your main interaction is ordering them around your ship, telling them to repair damaged systems, pilot, or heal up in the sickbay.

I have just two left. I put Emily at the helm, and Alison in the engine room ready to repair it if we take damage. We jump, and run into a small scout ship. It's an easy fight, and we get a good amount of scrap from the wreck. In the next system though, there's an asteroid field and a pirate vessel.

I target their shield generator with all my lasers and missiles, while chunks of rock batter away my own. As their shields go offline, it's fun to watch their own crew scramble around inside their ship trying to fix the generator while other systems catch fire. When they finally explode, the scrap from their vessel is substantial.

You can use scrap to upgrade, so I make a major investment to double my shields.

"My ship is a mess. The fire in my engine room will kill my crew if I send them to put it out."

And in the next system, I find a spare combat drone. It turns out to be a lethal combination: in every fight thereafter, my drone zaps away their shields in time for my main lasers to take out their generator.

I run into another slaver ship. Hand over a crew member? How about *you* hand over... your... hull integrity! Shoot them before they overanalyse my smacktalk!

We're both double-shielded, I have a combat drone and they have a defence drone. It's close. I use my lasers to take out their drone control system, and that lets my missiles get through to their shield generator. But by the time I take out their weapons systems, my engine is on fire. Luckily, they surrender – and offer me a slave to leave them alone.

Hah! No way, assholes! I don't slave. I destroy them, but my ship is a mess. The fire in my engine room would kill my crew if I sent them to put it out, so I open the exterior doors and vent the oxygen into space. That puts out the fire, but not before it spreads to the, er, oxygen room.

Alison has to run through the airless engine room to save the life support system. She does it, but suffocates before I can bring the repaired system back online. Emily is left to pilot the ship alone.

This game is brilliant, and brutal, and different every time.

It suddenly occurs to me that the slaver ship I just destroyed might have been the same one that took Jack. In fact, the slave they offered me might have *been* Jack. And I destroyed him. Jaaack! ■

Tom Francis

READ ME

PUBLISHER
TBA

DEVELOPER
Matthew Davis and Justin Ma

LINK
www.ftlgame.com

Release JUNE

Registered charity no. 1071659

It's easy to convince children that killing is a game.

Help stop the exploitation of child soldiers, text 'GUNS25 £2' to 70070.

WAR child

Worldvision.net

A turn later, these werewolves will kill that boat and I'll learn an important lesson about the range of ground units.

WARLOCK
MASTER OF THE ARCANE

PLAYED IT Call down the thunder in this game of fantasy strategy.

Given the choice, I'd rather be a wizard than Gandhi – and that's exactly the choice that *Warlock: Master of the Arcane* offers. It's an empire-building turn-based strategy game in the vein of *Civilization*, with the crucial difference that your choice of ruler gives you access to magical powers with which to directly involve yourself in the action.

You're still a disembodied hovering presence, but now you're one who can hurl down a fireball when you feel like it. Human, undead and monster factions each come with default leaders, all with distinct strengths and weaknesses. It's also possible to build your own, spending points on different traits to tweak your warlock to your preference. I create King Lichard the Third, a glowering skeleton in spiked armour who wields a direct-damage shadow bolt attack and is possessed of a mercantile nous that grants me a regular bonus to my income. Just because I can, I stick him in charge of the humans rather than the undead: presumably they don't ask too many questions about their leaders' lifestyles. Or lack thereof.

When I begin, I'm separated from my nearest neighbour by a narrow band of unclaimed land. Neutral cities like this are hostile by default, so I'm on the offensive from the get-go. I begin with a unit of

> **"Setting fire to an entire city of gnomes is officially better than diplomacy"**

archers with a generous pool of movement points, enabling me to get troops to the front line before the first turn is out.

Research, conducted in wizard-friendly buildings such as libraries, is used to unlock new spells as you go. I queue up a flashy-looking lightning bolt. I also begin building a magic tower, a glowing monolith that can zap invaders with deadly pink bursts of arcane energy.

My first band of archers is ineffective against the heavily armoured warriors being pitched against me – but those warriors, in turn, can't do anything about my magic tower other than scream and fall over. *Warlock*'s combat system includes a number of hard counters like this, but units that live long enough can unlock traits to round out their abilities. Accordingly, I'm much more careful with my next few batches of archers, and when I can I upgrade them with melee damage resistance. This strategy buys me enough time to unlock my own warriors, at which point my economic edge allows me to overwhelm the enemy's defences.

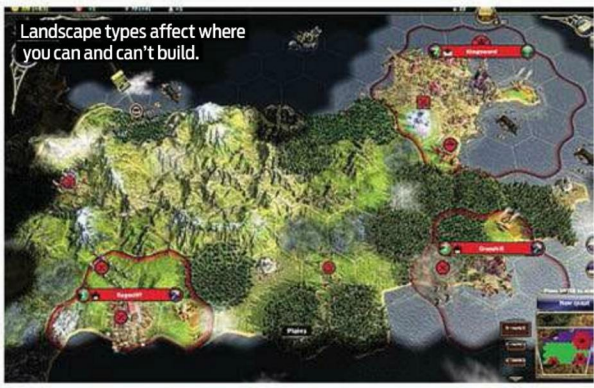
Striking out west, I encounter roaming bands of giant spiders. These NPC monsters act as deterrents to expansion, but once killed provide bonus chunks of gold and experience. Over the next dozen turns, I methodically purge my starting island of arachnids and earn myself a very healthy sum for doing so. Magic is especially useful at this stage: when my archers leave a group of spiders with a tiny sliver of health – and the opportunity to strike on the following turn – I use my

READ ME
PUBLISHER
Paradox Interactive
DEVELOPER
Ino-Co Plus
LINK
bit.ly/tINrxh

The starting units for different races are just about analogous, but quickly diverge.

Spells like this firestorm are highly destructive, but cost a lot of mana.

That octopus only has six legs.


Landscape types affect where you can and can't build.

Shipwrecks can contain loot and bonus spells.

Maintaining a large army requires a lot of farms.

new lightning spell to see them off.

At this point, I start researching healing spells: while units can regenerate health by resting for a turn, being able to keep my upgraded troops in the fight is becoming more and more essential. Magic solves problems quickly, but mana is in short supply – using it effectively is a careful balancing act.

Building another city at the far end of the island, I'm left with nowhere to expand. I turn my focus to naval production. Before long, my caravels are scouting the world and battling sea monsters. In one shipwreck, I find a spell that allows me to call down a rain of meteors anywhere within line of sight. For a few turns, I bombard coastal cities with heavenly fire simply for the fun of it. Setting fire to an entire city full of gnomes with a single click is officially better than diplomacy.

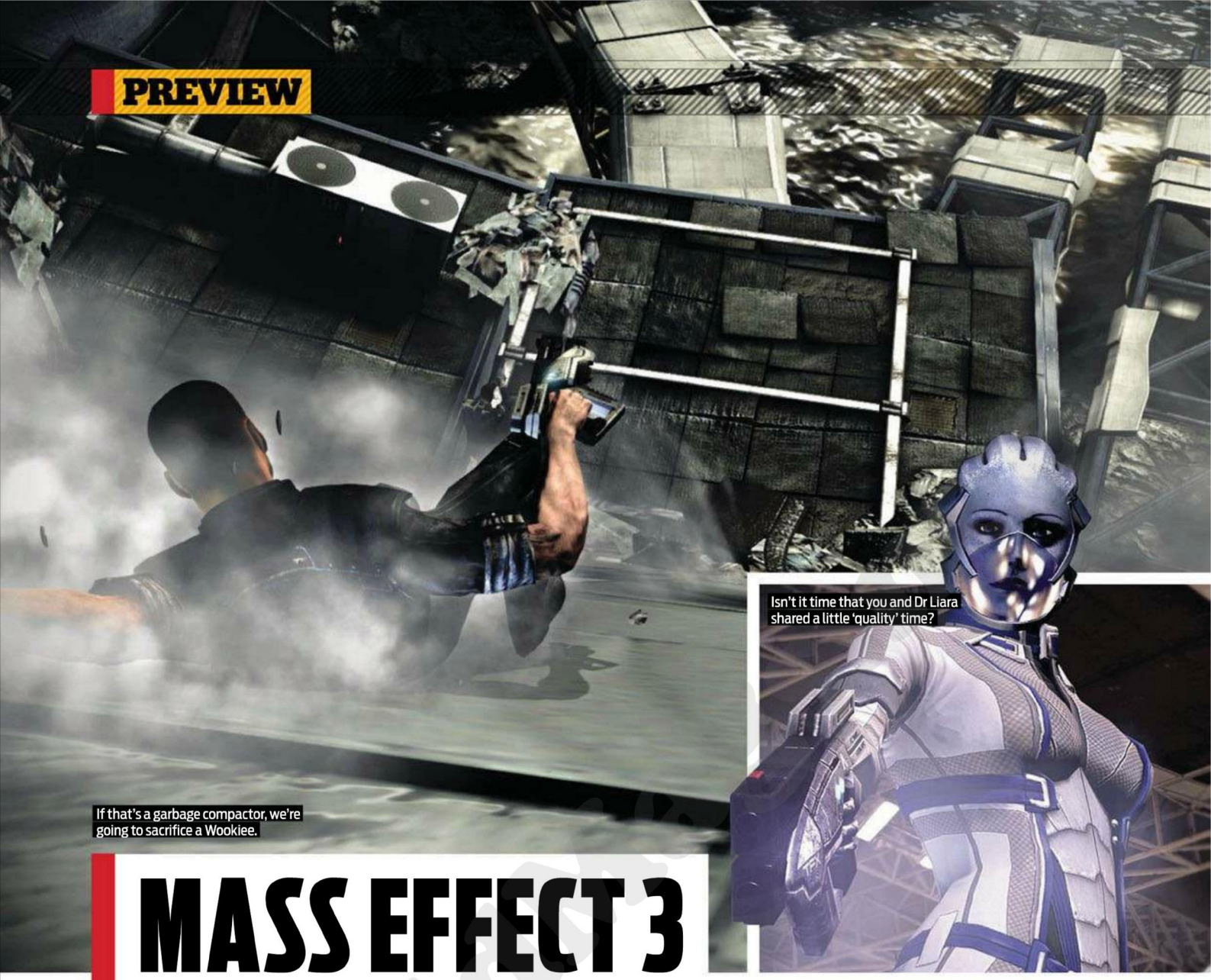
With research dedicated solely to magic, progression through the tech tree is determined by what you've built – which in turn depends on how much space you've got. As your army size is restricted by how much food is available, this creates a natural tension: do you fill the available land with farms, or go for that elven archery range you fancy? Further up the tech tree, your options expand to include armies of lizardmen, mages, and dragons – so it's tempting to let the peasants starve. I opted to divide my settlements up by role: establishing one town as my breadbasket, another for unit production, and a final one to act as a firestorm-fuelling mana battery.

As I encounter more neutral cities and rival civilisations, I don't really get to see the AI do anything other than attack – while the diplomacy interface hints at approval ratings, these stay static as I play. In the final version, a more dynamic world will be essential if your expansion is going to have meaning.

Late-game units like dragons give *Warlock* a distinct feel, but shouldn't be expected to carry the game when the clean-up phase sets in. There's plenty of time for these rough edges to get smoothed out. ■

Chris Thursten

Release SPRING



If that's a garbage compactor, we're going to sacrifice a Wookiee.

Isn't it time that you and Dr Liara shared a little 'quality' time?

MASS EFFECT 3

PLAYED IT The SSV Normandy's D-Day is fast approaching

At the centre of the roleplaying petri dish, a colourful swirl of games are gently bleeding into each other. Flat-out action games adopt the character builds and XP systems of the traditional RPG, while roleplaying adventures of a certain mass-market mindset bury their statistics deep behind rows of headshots.

Mass Effect 3 looks to be a high point of this trend. BioWare say that it's set to make a leap in quality beyond *ME2* like the leap *ME2* made beyond the original.

Eager to temporarily borrow the keys to someone else's Shepard, deep within BioWare HQ I saw off enough Cerberus commandos to give this bold claim credence. The premise of my early mission was a violent race in the shadow of an encroaching sandstorm through a Mars mining facility.

READ ME
PUBLISHER EA
DEVELOPER BioWare
LINK www.masseffect.com

A Prothean artefact with anti-Reaper qualities has been uncovered, and both Shepard and the Illusive Man gang dearly want it on their mantelpiece. Aided and abetted by new boy James Vega (heavily inspired by Sawyer from Lost) and whoever survived from the Ashley/Kaiden collective in *Mass Effect*, the advance in action quality is apparent from the off.

BioWare have doubled the number of developers giving life to Shepard's free-

> **"My mission was a race through a Mars mining facility in the shadow of an encroaching storm"**

flowing ducks, rolls, melee swipes, running jumps and potshots, and also to the combat smarts of the Cerberus and Reaper fodder that stand in her (or his) way. Shield-wielding enemies scuttle down parallel corridors to flank you while their buddies tactically retreat further up in the map, while the simple addition of verticality (ladders!) manages to spruce up level design no end. Sudden twists in the action were used sparingly in *ME2*, yet here they're laid end to end. Ambushes on incoming NPCs, surprise attacks from the dark through satisfyingly smashable windows, long-distance fire-fights on a moving monorail... there's more life on the Red Planet than you might expect.

The primary draw of *ME3*, however, is its role as a grand finale – a blaze of glory for your own personal Shepard. It begins with a hastily convened meeting between Shepard, Anderson and the woefully prepared leaders of Earth on the day the Reapers (the caretakers of the galaxy, who sweep up all organic life every 50,000 years) finally make their eventful return.

The skies outside the window are suddenly pierced by vast Reapers descending like clawed fists, who go on to stomp between futuro-Vancouver's skyscrapers and destroy all that stands in their path with unworldly 'phftang!' noises. Before anyone has time to comment on the scene's War of the Worlds feel, the room is awash with blood, flames and broken glass. Shepard's quest to unite the disparate races of the galaxy against their common enemy has begun.

Cannibals can regenerate by eating fallen enemies... which is nice.

Unite the galaxy against the Reapers – a man/woman's work is never done.

One word: badass.

If you're a returning hero, then your reputation and prior activities in the galaxy will take its toll on your recruitment drive. Gazing into the development toolkit of lead writer Mac Walters – a busy nest of stored decisions feeding into a mesh of dialogue possibilities – feels a little like being in freefall. "It took three months at the beginning of this project to deal with the decision to kill off any of the henchmen at the end of *ME2*," he mutters. "They're all major characters, but they all could be dead. What were we thinking?"

The first game's binary choice of whether you save Kaiden or Ashley means you'll have either the sensitive soldier or the brunette space racist onboard (both suspicious of Shepard's dealings with Cerberus in *ME2*) but previous decisions made over the Rachni queen, the Collector base, the Genophage, the Geth and good old Wrex will also come back to alternately haunt or help you. Getting a perfect playthrough and appeasing enough alien races is promised to be very tricky indeed.

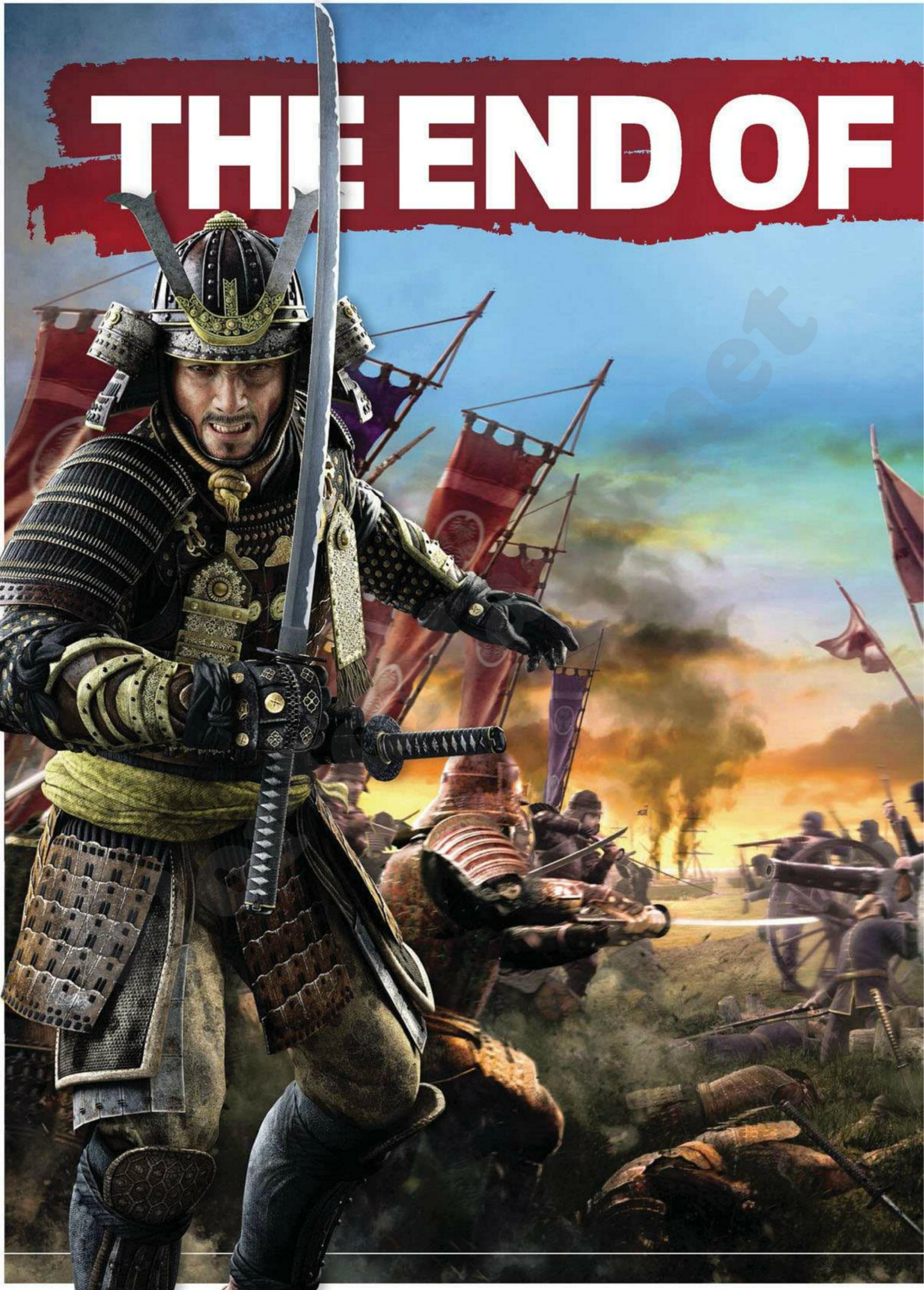
Enter stage left *Mass Effect*'s controversial Galaxy at War system, a sort of social metagame hub where your success in *ME3*'s horde-based co-op multiplayer (and the Facebook games and apps) serves as a multiplier to your proficiency against the Reapers on the approach to the endgame. You're presented with the forces you've amassed, including characters such as Samara and contingents of Asari Commandos and Mindbenders, and encouraged to shuttle them between Reaper troublespots. It's a needless addition, but a forgivable one if it turns out to be fun. Shepard's adventures tend to consume body and soul, so being able to aid the war effort while on the bus has a certain allure.

Inside and out, *Mass Effect 3* is laced with feelings of wartime chaos. As I stood in the BioWare writers' room I couldn't help but notice stirring Churchill quotations pinned above the door. Anything in the game that lacked urgency has been trimmed (goodbye mining), and wherever you fly you'll see charred space detritus or fleets of doomed warships. The final battle will soon be upon us, and the bodycount will be high. How high? That's down to you. ■

Will Porter

Release MARCH

THE END OF



AN ERA

RELEASE
MARCH

In **FALL OF THE SAMURAI**, *Total War* teeters on the edge of murderous modernity.

By Tim Stone

Through shallows of waving grass they come, hundreds of them, spears gripped, armour glittering, flags aflutter in the scented spring breeze. So many gaudy uniforms and ludicrous hats! So much splendour and misguided confidence.

The gaily coloured attackers are converging on my anvil – four formations of nervous Kiheitai riflemen. My hammers – twelve units of Sharpshooters and White Bear infantry – are waiting in nearby woodland for the perfect moment to strike.

That moment is close. In fact that moment is... wait-for-it...

wait-for-it...

NOW!

A flurry of mouse clicks and the trap springs shut. Instinctively, I select my single Gatling gun battery, and jab the 'H' key. The camera drops like a stricken pigeon. Suddenly I'm observing the increasingly chaotic battlefield from a spot just above and behind a single wheeled machinegun. Slap-bang in the centre of the screen is a crosshairs. Left mouse button depressed, I drag this reticle along a line of charging spearmen. Targets are knocked off their feet, flicked like puppets into unnatural poses, sent twirling to the turf...

When the smoke clears and my finger finally lifts, the greensward in front of the battery is littered with dead and dying. An entire enemy unit – and one rather cynical games previewer – has been comprehensively blown away.

Directly controllable artillery isn't *Fall of the Samurai*'s most significant feature, but it's probably its most irresistible and surprising. During my day in Horsham sampling this impressively big and bold standalone *Shogun 2* expansion, I lost several scraps because I couldn't drag myself away from the third-person shell slinging and MG mayhem. Nailing far-off commanders is deliberately difficult. The camera accompanies larger projectiles, but there's no sniper-style zoom view. A year of testing convinced the devs that too many aiming aids risked turning multiplayer matches into daft duels. It also persuaded them to plump for an over-the-shoulder perspective rather than a context-limiting first-person one.

While there will be occasions in *FotS* when you get to mow down serried rows of katana-clutching samurai with 400-rounds-per-minute MGs and sophisticated long-range cannons, Creative Assembly are too serious about their history for it to be a regular occurrence. Despite the cinematic Last Samurai overtones of the launch trailer, the game's primary focus is the Boshin War (1868-1869) rather than the ill-fated Satsuma Rebellion (1877) that inspired much of the 2003 Tom Cruise movie. Both sides in this low-key civil war were enthusiastic modernisers, eager to lay their hands on the latest Western military tech and techniques. ▸

There's a bit of Arab in the horse model. And a bit of pantomime.

"Uh oh, that flag's on fire."

Are CA warming up for the American Civil War?

Naval cannons and coastal forts can be directly controlled too.

"Navies have finally become indispensable strategic tools"

Whether you choose to play as one of the three pro-Imperialist factions (Choshu, Satsuma or Tosa) or opt for one of the Shogun-loyal trio (Aizu, Jozai, Nagaoka), your approach to martial matters is likely to be much the same: you'll want to scramble up the pleasingly branchy and unfamiliar R&D bonsai as quickly as possible. Off the bat you'll probably have access to spear toters, matchlock men and static wooden-barrelled cannons, but to have any hope of spreading your dominion and surviving the coming country-wide convulsions, you'll want to tax, trade, and study your way towards units that owe more to the mechanical age than the medieval one.

In order to capture the feel of Japan's scarily swift transformation from feudal agrarian backwater to modern industrial state, the *FotS* clockface features incredibly fine gradations. Clicking the 'end turn' button advances your campaign a mere two weeks. With biting winters now lasting six turns, ponderous or ill-timed invasions will be costlier than ever.

Naval blazing

Longer cold snaps aren't the only new feature the humble *Total War* grunt has to worry about. Now the poor buggers that do the trigger-pulling and sword-slashing can be slain *between battles* by naval bombardment. Select a friendly fleet on the campaign map and a range circle appears. Any enemy army within this zone-o'-death may be pummelled without risk, with one mouse-click. You won't devastate targets, but hounding an invasion force as it trudges down a long coast road could make the difference between victory and defeat in a later battle.

Mark this moment. In *Fall of the Samurai*, *Total War* navies finally go from being amusing distractions to indispensable strategic tools. That bombardment ability can also be used to clobber cities, neutralise coastal batteries (a new buildable structure) and turn the tide in traditional ground battles. Friendly fleets within shell-chucking range of a skirmish appear on the battle screen in the form of an interface tab. Select, position the targeting circle and, a few moments later, giant high-explosive hailstones will start hurtling down. It's the perfect way to punish a hillock-camper, or rip inviting holes in daunting frontlines. Watching a naval stonk land it's hard not to think of the Dardanelles and D-Day and wonder if the feature isn't preparatory in more ways than one.

Naval battles themselves are difficult to assess at this stage, as CA are still tinkering with such fundamentals as

BISH BOSH BOSHIN Boshin War basics

1854
After 200 years of isolation, Japan is bullied into accepting international trade, opening the door to wild modernisation.

1863
The Emperor sides with the growing anti-foreigner movement, a move that puts him at odds with the progressive Shogun.

1864
Xenophobic attacks prompt retaliatory bombardments by foreign powers. An Imperial rebellion vs the Shogun fails.

1865
The Imperialists update their armies with British and American help. Meanwhile, the Shogun looks to the French for training and supplies.

1866
Attempting to crush a second uprising, Shogunate armies are defeated by a Choshu force secretly allied with nearby Satsuma.

1867
A weakened Shogun resigns his powers to the Emperor, but the Shogun's family (the Tokugawa) retains political influence.

1868
Tension between the Imperialists and the Tokugawa erupts into conflict after the Imperialists attempt to consolidate their power.

Say the word and this death-spitter is yours to aim and fire.

turning speeds, AI behaviours and hull strengths. The far-reaching guns and sturdy iron armour on mid- to late-game vessels should give wet warfare a very different feel, as should such history-stretching novelties as torpedo boats. Totem Games, the makers of the *Ironclads* series, have delved into this curious period in naval history relatively recently, and it will be interesting to see how the two interpretations compare.

Exploiting steam power on land will be every bit as important as exploiting it on water. *Total War* has finally reached the train age, and watching the little beauties choo-chooing their way across the campaign map is – like spotting jets in the sky in a WWII flight sim – both delightful and faintly disconcerting. Unlocked and built in the same way as any other structure, stations in neighbouring provinces automatically form a steely link. The more provinces you connect, the more your trade revenue increases, and the more chance you have of responding quickly to unexpected incursions. CA community manager and ex-PCG-regular Al Bickham described a game in which a well-developed rail network pretty much saved his bacon. Using steel horses he was able to gallop agents vast distances towards an invader. The agents did what agents do best – delayed, sabotaged and bribed – buying Al enough time to bolster defences in the threatened city.

Secret servants

Unsurprisingly, given the 300-year period shift, most of the cast of spies and rabble-rousers don't come direct from *Shogun 2*. Working alongside familiar Shinobi (ninjas) and Geisha are two faction-specific secret policemen – the Ishen-Shishi (Imperialist) and Shinsengumi (Shogunate) and the massively useful Foreign Veteran. Remember the nasty Colonel Bagley in The Last Samurai? That's the kind of calculating, conscience-free merc you get when you employ a foreign veteran. With one of these embedded in an army, your troops will move, reload and gain experience faster. There's even the possibility of using them to eliminate enemy generals through duels – though that sounds like a very dicey job for such invaluable individuals.

With only a day to play the surprisingly polished alpha build, I didn't have time to hoof through the full quarter-century of a long campaign, but I did – via a save file – get a tantalising taste of late-game politics and army compositions. Rather than gleefully dissolving all your carefully cultivated alliances and forcing you into a gruelling multi-front struggle for survival, Realm Divide in *Fall of* ▸

1868
The Imperialists' small yet modernised army comes out on top in early battles. The Shogun retreats after allied defections.

1868
Despite naval victories, the Shogun's troops are pushed north and eastward. Most surrender after the fall of Edo (Tokyo) in June.

1868
A Northern Alliance led by the Aizu clan holds out until November. Navy remnants flee to Hokkaido and set up a republic.

1869
A daring rebel attempt to capture the pride of the Imperial fleet – the ironclad Kotetsu – is foiled by bad luck and a Gatling gun.

1869
After neutralising the shore defences and the rebel navy, 7,000 Imperial troops land on Hokkaido. French advisors skedaddle.

1869
The republic falls, ushering in an Imperial era in which the country is unified. The samurai class is systematically dismantled.

1877
Disgruntled Satsuma samurai rise against the new regime, but the rebellion ends in bloody defeat. Tom Cruise is sad.

This hardly seems the time for a fireworks display.

the Samurai involves making a difficult choice. If you fancy it, you can leave the Shogunate and Imperialist factions to fight amongst themselves and go it alone as a friendless independent republic. Alternatively you can accept the responsibilities and regalia of Shogunate or Imperial 'Vanguard' (the choice will depend on your current allegiance). Take the latter route and you're guaranteed some continuity of support. You may even be able to persuade some old enemies to bury the hatchet for the common good.

By the time of Realm Divide, it's likely your troops will be doing most of their slaying with fancy Western-designed rifles and artillery pieces, rather than cold steel and arrows. The shooting irons used by Ruritanian wonders like White Bear Infantry, Royal Marines and Kiheitai riflemen fire further and faster, and are far more likely to hit what they're aimed at than the fusty muskets of *Empire* and *Napoleon: Total War*. The increased reach and lethality of line units means that tactics that produced victories in *Shogun 2* may well produce valedictions in *Fall of the Samurai*.

Chatting to James Russell (lead designer) and Jamie Ferguson (lead battle designer) about the re-education of the tacAI, the pair talked of the work that has gone into honing its threat awareness, (specifically in relation to fields of fire), decisiveness, and use of such manoeuvres as flanking and – gulp – double envelopment. Artificial opponents have had special lessons in Not Acting Like Pillocks When Faced With Gatling Guns, so hopefully, we shouldn't see too many Last Samurai-style frontal assaults.

"Expect to see enemy shipping sagely switching from blockades to bombardments"

Shipping forecast

Improvements in naval nous sound even more substantial. Lead campaign designer Janos Gaspar described how computer-controlled admirals now have a much more sophisticated understanding of geography and, thanks to a new taskforce system, are much better at setting up fleets and dealing with several tasks simultaneously. Expect to see enemy shipping sagely switching from blockades to bombardments, and dashing off to help with troop transportation when the need arises.

Away from battlefields and brine, Creative Assembly have actually been lobotomising their AI. Apparently, in the current build, silicon powers are far too efficient at managing their economies and will routinely outproduce most players by 30-35%. When James cheerfully admitted that they would have to "cheat in favour of the player" I remembered my two campaign false-starts earlier in the day and nodded enthusiastically.

In the unlikely event *Fall of the Samurai*'s reworked AI fails to stretch you, then a couple of series additions will allow for some self-imposed challenge stiffening. Winning every engagement with a mix of inspired tactics and encyclopedic knowledge of unit stats? Try Battle Realism Mode's restricted camera, absent minimap, and limited enemy intel. Alternatively, make life hard for yourself by handing over a few units to the AI. Not only is it now possible to participate in 40 vs 40 unit scraps thanks to an altered approach to reinforcements, but packets of troops can be passed to the AI together with simple 'attack' or 'defend' instructions. Is this the first step on the road to multi-tier *Take Command*-style armies and plausible battlefield subordinates? Probably not, but it's an intriguing development.

Tight-lipped on the topic of future *Total War* directions, James, Jamie and Janos were happy to talk about inspiration and research. If you want to know why *Fall of the Samurai* looks, feels and plays the way it does, then a

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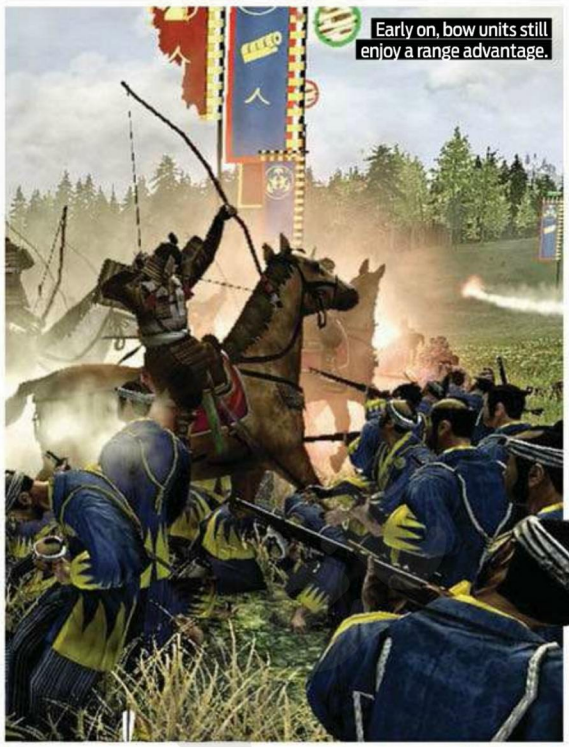
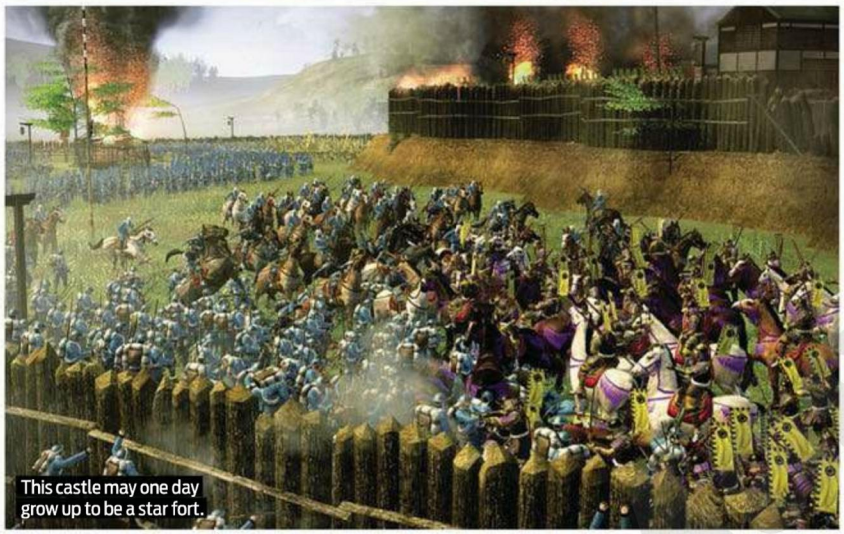
Kevlar armour takes 2,500 turns to research.



Early on, bow units still enjoy a range advantage.



This castle may one day grow up to be a star fort.

Well I never! A *TW* tub helping out a land battle.

CONFLICT COMPASS Which area of the globe will *Total War* trash next?

1 BRITAIN
Chance: *tiny*
Because Blighty has figured in a good-few *TW* campaign maps, and CA like their conflicts clogged with distinctive factions, the Civil War installment every patriotic Brit craves is highly unlikely.

2 THE MED
Chance: *moderate*
It's surely only a matter of time before the team return to the setting of their 2004 smash. A modernised *Rome: Total War* would sell like giant foam thumbs at a Coliseum matinee.

3 THE MIDDLE-EAST
Chance: *slim*
Egypt, Iraq, Persia... wherever you look in the sandy junction between Africa and Asia, there's combat-rich ancient history waiting to be digitally disinterred. *TW* needs more chariots.

4 CHINA AND KOREA
Chance: *high*
Extending the *Shogun 2* map north or westwards would open up all kinds of intriguing unit possibilities. A little further to the left, the incredible story of the Khmer Empire remains untold.

5 MIDDLE-EARTH
Chance: *Hobbit-foetus minute*
Whenever I visit CA in Horsham I leave little *LotR* hints. This time it was a basket of lembas bread and a pewter Balrog. Last time it was a Tom Bombadil songbook and a jiffy-bag full of Warg poo.

good place to start is the book list on *www.stephenturnbull.com*. An evening with Japanese movie When The Last Sword Is Drawn should also prove illuminating.

The game's relationship to The Last Samurai is – as previously mentioned – not nearly as close as it might first appear, but the devs have obviously pored over its action sequences. Satsuma Rebellion-style revolts will happen now and again, meaning players will find themselves leading expeditions into the back-country to suppress armies of disgruntled nobles. The samurai sprinting stirringly through storms of machinegun and rifle fire are far more likely to be reactionary foe than valued friends.

In *Fall of the Samurai*'s brave new world, almost everyone hates change. The simple act of shinning-up the tech tree increases your Modernisation Level which in turn stokes popular disquiet. Going by our playtest, it's not food shortages or even occupation resentment that will be your biggest civic headache in this instalment, it's a disoriented populace that longs for the days when sunsets weren't smudged by factory smoke, picturesque valleys haunted by noisy, impatient dragons.

As your lands lurch into modernity, so too will the interface, the campaign map and the background music. The sounds of traditional Japan will slowly and subtly give ground to Western instruments and motifs. Screen furniture will assume a more mechanized look. A completely reorganised campaign map, graced by new loftier peaks, will acquire smokestacks and smoggy blemishes. *Total War* is knocking on the door of the 20th century, and that door is soot-caked and strange.

As historical themes go, it's hard to think of one fresher or more alluring than Boshin War-era Japan. Cynics may point out that the real conflict 'only' claimed the lives of 4,000, that it featured more nervous scuffles than full-scale pitched battles, but this would be a tad unfair. As Jamie observed: "with all *Total War* games we start with a factual startpoint then allow for counter-factual history to take place... There's nothing to say that, if either side had decided to get really serious, it couldn't have ended up in a conflict far more bloody than the American Civil War."

A conflict far more bloody than the American Civil War? With *Total War*'s unit counts that could be a tall order, but then again, with Gatling guns, naval barrages and repeating rifles in our armouries for the first time, anything's possible. ■

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The panel

Who voted for the PC Gamer Top 100?
The PCG Top 100 panel of judges comprises experts from both UK and US magazines and PCGamer.com. They are.

Chris Thursten
Intern

Evan Lahti
Senior editor (US)

Graham Smith
Deputy editor

Josh Augustine
Associate editor (US)

Owen Hill
Web editor

Rich McCormick
Staff writer

Richard Cobbett
Freelancer

Tim Edwards
Editor

Tim Stone
Freelancer

Tom Francis
Section editor

Tom Senior
Freelancer

Tony Ellis
Production editor

Tom Hatfield
Intern

THE BEST 100 PC GAMES EVER

PC Gamer's definitive list of the greatest games of all time

"Hello and good evening, Britain. This is it: welcome to the Best 100 PC Games *Ever*. It's been an incredible year, with a flood of such amazing talent that our elite panel of judges have had to rethink their all-time favourites. It's all been leading up to tonight, and the competition is intense. Even the number one spot is up for grabs – can *Deus Ex* keep its throne with a newer, sexier *Deus Ex* game on the scene? Can *Skyrim* overthrow the king with a well-placed dragon shout? And can *anything* compete with the all-consuming *StarCraft II*, the game that's become the national sport of the geek nation?

There's no room for nostalgia tonight, and no room for mercy: these are just the best games in existence. It's time... to face... the painstakingly ordered list."

100 WORLD OF GOO

Release: 2008 Last year: -

Tom Francis: Building little squidgy structures is kind of fun. World of Goo is a lesson in how to take something 'kind of fun' and explore it, expand on it, enrich it and subvert it into something that's miraculously good. Every level feels brand new, gorgeous, different and fresh. The humour in the writing, and the imagination in the world the writers have created, give World of Goo more personality than a building game has any right to have.

Graham Smith: Balloon goos! Sticky goos! Explosive goos! Digital goos found within a beautiful world inside my computer!

Tom Senior: World of Goo makes me feel sorry for the blobs I couldn't save. I could always have rescued more. Tweak this support pillar, three more saved! Attach the balloons a little sooner to the end of the creaking bridge, 20 more saved! Sometimes I engineer a structure that can be dismantled gradually from the back, funnelling every single blob into the hungry pipe with an loud, glorious SLURP noise. Most satisfying.

99 GRIM FANDANGO
Release: 1998 Last year: 80

Tom Francis: It's rare enough to like anyone in a game, rarer still to like the hero. But Manny Calavera is easily one of the top 15 coolest skeletal travel agents. His attempt to be the Humphrey Bogart of Mexico is as charming as his frequent failure to pull it off.

98 DUNGEON KEEPER
Release: 1997 Last year: 55

Tom Hatfield: Few games make being the bad guy as fun as *Dungeon Keeper*, but that's because few do it in such a hilarious way. The chance to finally turn the tables on those po-faced heroes by turning their dungeon crawl into a deathtrap was a fantastic concept, but it would never have worked without Bullfrog's sense of dark humour.

96 SILENT HUNTER III
Release: 2005 Last year: 84

Tim Stone: As a game, it really shouldn't work. You spend 50% of your time watching an icon inch across a chart, and 45% trying to put holes in the hulls of unarmed targets. What transforms the experience is the trickiness of torpedo slinging, and the thought of that remaining 5%. Deep down you know that your luck is going to run out, and you're going to find yourself bathed in sweat as the din of corvette screws passes overhead.

95 DRAGON AGE 2
Release: 2011 Last year: NE

Tom Hatfield: *Dragon Age 2* undoubtedly had problems, but if you're playing a BioWare game, what matters more? Some recycled areas, or the best writing of any game this year? *Dragon Age 2*'s colourful characters and the banter between them makes up for its faults.
Rich McCormick: Kirkwall is a *place*. It changes politically over time, and feels more like home than other RPGs' Coronation Street-set cities.

94 TIE FIGHTER
Release: 1994 Last year: 46

Tim Edwards: There are important things to remember about *TIE Fighter* that sometimes we forget: 1) it was a genuinely great space-combat sim, with a blistering sense of speed, and with scripting that still impresses. Missions would begin with you escorting freighters, or checking for smugglers, or assaulting a rebel cruiser, but veer wildly out of control, revealing multiple new objectives. 2) It was impressively sinister – the intro was a kind of rock-and-roll Star Wars that didn't mollycoddle that the Emperor was definitely a bad dude. 3) It had a manual the size of a doorstop, most of which was taken up by a Star Wars mini-novel, in which the player character was indoctrinated into the Empire. His room-mate became a Stormtrooper and everything.

93 KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC
Release: 2003 Last year: 31

Rich McCormick: *KOTOR* was Bioware at their most freewheeling, filling a ship, a planet, a galaxy with characters they wanted to write and stories they were desperate to tell. At times it doesn't even feel like Star Wars, the plot going darker and deeper than that Saturday afternoon fare. But then the theme starts up, and you're back in the best Star Wars game ever.
Tom Hatfield: Unconditional Praise: HK-47 is the funniest character Bioware have ever written.

92 SAINTS ROW 2
Release: 2009 Last year: NE

Richard Cobbett: *Saint's Row 2* is what *GTA4* should have been - a game that embraced the silliness of open world action instead of being po-faced and dull. It had a seriously dark side too though, offering a contrast missing from the third game, and making you feel all the more badass for getting away with your increasingly ridiculous crimes. Also, it had a great poo-spraying minigame.

91 PSYCHONAUTS
Release: 2005 Last year: NE

Tom Francis: Some games treat their levels as obstacle courses to teach you their mechanics. In *Psychonauts*, the levels are king: each one is a fresh idea, and everything from the art to the mechanics are custom-built to make that weird place real. It makes playing it feel like an adventure.
Tom Hatfield: My favourite is the milkman conspiracy, or black velvetopia, or lungfishopolis. *Psychonauts* had more creativity in every level than some games manage in an entire series.

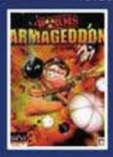
90 MASQ
Release: 2007 Last year: NE

Graham Smith: *Masq* is a black-and-white interactive comic about putting on a fashion show, cheating on your wife, solving a murder and maybe getting arrested, divorced or killed. With a simple interface and a dozen story branches, *Masq* is an endlessly replayable soap opera, and a framework that I'm still waiting for other interactive fiction to follow.
Tom Hatfield: *Masq*-man may have the least manly job of any game character ever, but he still manages to embroil himself in a seedy world of womanising and organised crime. All while making pretty dresses. Now that's a *real* man.

89 LIMBO
Release: 2011 Last year: NE

Tom Francis: *Limbo* is a nightmare in silhouette: beautiful, sad and terrifying. The shadow-puppet presentation lets your brain fill in the details of the dark shapes stalking you, and the pixel-perfect animation makes them uncomfortably real. It's deservedly famous for the greatest spider in videogames – a series of encounters with a properly horrible arachnid that turn from chilling to outright gruesome. But it's not just that which makes it so chilling. Even the other humans in this place seem to bear you a silent menace as they scamper away to lure you to your death. It's a horrible place to be. I love it.

88 WORMS ARMAGEDDON
Release: 1999 Last year: NE



Tom Francis: This is a simple, side-on, turn-based war game, but is also a guaranteed way for two people to spend 20 straight minutes laughing. Your toolbelt of conventional and idiotic weapons obey simple rules, but the randomised battlefields and various volatile elements lead to spectacular calamity with almost every shot. Usually for the shooter.

87 ULTIMA V
Release: 1988 Last year: NE

Tony Ellis: So much of what makes *Skyrim* great can be found in *Ultima V*: a huge, go-anywhere realm, quests you can pick up and drop as you please. Most of all, the sense that you've somehow stumbled upon a real, functioning world that would still exist if you weren't there to play it. And all achieved with EGA graphics and about half a megabyte of RAM.

86 RED ORCHESTRA
Release: 2006 Last year: 99

Tim Stone: Most military FPSs make me feel like Captain Hurricane (ask your dad who he is). In *Red Orchestra* I'm a clumsy bundle of nerves letting off rounds at a glimpse of my own shadow. To sprint up the body-strewn shingle of Dog Green beach (a *Darkest Hour* map) while hot spears of MG42 fire fizz past is to glimpse the true insanity of war.

85 GTA: SAN ANDREAS
Release: 2005 Last year: NE

Rich McCormick: It's every ghetto kid's dream. Start out in the hood, claw your way out with just enough money to get by, jump out of a stolen plane with a parachute, help your friends escape the ghetto, burn a hippie's secret weed field, buy your moms a house, nab a jetpack and ride it around the sky shooting Uzis at innocent pedestrians, accidentally start a mini civil war. San Andreas gives itself ample room to let players really *play*.

84 DOOM
Release: 1993 Last year: 41

Richard Cobbett: No game this old should be this much damn fun. It's easy to overlook what *Doom* gave us, from levels that tried to actually feel like real places to the satisfying ka-chunk of its shotgun. Deathmatch may have moved on, but fire it up in co-op with two or three of your best friends and you're still in for a hellish little treat.

Owen Hill: Still my favourite game soundtrack of all time.

97 BRAID
Release: 2008 Last year: 33

Tom Francis: A good indie game has a clever central mechanic: *Braid* has five. Each world is a new game, but each ties into the central theme of twisting time. It explores every interesting puzzle possibility exactly once, never demanding repetition or outstaying its welcome. Almost every puzzle seems impossible, but you're given the space and freedom to move on and try other things while your brain slowly rewires itself around the game's weird concepts.

Tony Ellis: Most games reward my persistence. Many reward my reactions. *Braid* is one of the few that rewards me for managing to think in whole new ways. Such as, "How can I kill myself in such a fashion that it helps my other self who I'll create after I die by going back in time to stop myself dying?"

83 WARHAMMER 40,000: DAWN OF WAR 2
Release: 2009 Last year: NE

Tom Hatfield: The other aspects of *Dawn of War 2* may have fallen by the wayside, but I still play the three-player survival mode. The unlock system is compulsive: every new unlock makes you rethink your build, rearranging old gear and realising that gun you thought was useless is now *perfect* for your new concept. You aren't just levelling, you're creating something new.

82 COMMAND & CONQUER
Release: 1995 Last year: NE

Graham Smith: The cutscenes are remembered for their hammy acting, but what gets lost is how *cool* they were. They let you see ten-pixel high units as human beings, and showed the escalating conflict between the GDI and Nod through increasingly sweaty, actors yelling at you.

It was never camp. It never let slip that it was just a game. From the install process onwards, *C&C* sold you a realistic fantasy of being a commander in a futuristic war, and it was brilliant.

81 GALACTIC CIVILIZATIONS 2: TWILIGHT OF THE ARNOR
Release: 2006 Last year: 79

Tom Francis: Managing a few hundred billion people over a few dozen planets is a pretty hard task. But *Galactic Civilizations 2* is turn based, so you can take as long over it as you like. The upshot is not a hard game, but one that can absorb all the brainpower you throw at it. It's constantly engrossing.

80 TITAN QUEST
Release: 2006 Last year: NE

Tom Francis: A beautifully crisp globe-trotting RPG click-em-up. It's built to the *Diablo* template, but it's more freeform: you can combine any two of its many classes to come up with interesting builds. And it's lovely: not randomising the levels allowed them to craft gorgeous renditions of ancient China, Greece and Egypt. ▶

79 VVVVVV

Release: 2010 Last year: 64

Graham Smith: This game makes the best of a really simple idea. Instead of jumping, your only ability in *VVVVVV* is to flip your little hero from floor to ceiling. Across hundreds of rooms, the game explores that simple concept to its fullest, and creates a surprising, challenging and truly compulsive platform game. You'll die a hundred times on the room called Veni, Vidi, Vici alone, but you'll keep trying due to the game's quick restarts, retro charm and catchy chiptunes.

78 ULTIMA UNDERWORLD II

Release: 1993 Last year: 98

Tony Ellis: It was 1993, but luckily no one told Looking Glass you couldn't possibly make a 3D, texture-mapped, world-spanning first-person RPG. Let alone one where you could pick things up, throw them, and trade them with NPCs. And jump. And swim. And fly. Even today *UUII* is an absorbing, atmospheric adventure. At the time, it was nothing short of a revolution.

77 THIEF: DEADLY SHADOWS

Release: 2004 Last year: NE

Tom Senior: *Thief* proves that picking pockets and nicking fine silver is more tense and frightening than being a noble knight. Garret's amorality makes him the perfect avatar for a journey through Ion Storm's dark, steampunk vision of London, realised perfectly in *Deadly Shadows*. The levels are smaller than in the first two games, but the claustrophobia only adds more menace to *Deadly Shadows*' narrow alleys. Haunting, occasionally horrifying and impossible to forget.

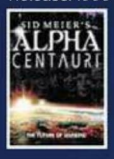
76 IL-2 STURMOVIK

Release: 2001 Last year: NE

Tim Stone: There is something eye-wateringly visceral about *IL-2 Sturmovik*. Compared with previous combat flight sims, the tracers burned brighter, the cannon shells hit harder, the ragged fuselage holes gaped wider. Factor in some superb flight models and sturdy, high-headcount netcode, and it's little wonder that the sim dominated for so long.

75 SID MEIER'S ALPHA CENTAURI

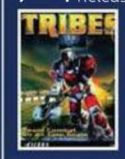
Release: 1999 Last year: 75



Richard Cobbett: *Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri* is still probably my favourite 4X game of all time, partly for its gloriously complicated mechanics (need rain? Try terraforming!), but mostly for its sense of character. With just a few scraps of text and voice, Brian Reynolds and his team built a stunningly complete universe. Oooh, that Sister Miriam. Grr.

74 TRIBES 2

Release: 2001 Last year: NE



Chris Thursten: If movement isn't fun, why have a big map? If players are soaring through the air and sliding down mountains, why settle for boring guns? Skiing and spinfuzors are two of the greatest concepts in large-scale multiplayer, and *Tribes 2* combined the two with the best map design in the series. Executing a successful flag capture alongside your team is a thing of elegant, choreographed beauty.

73 STALKER: SHADOW OF CHERNOBYL

Release: 2007 Last year: NE

Rich McCormick: The Zone is an alien place, filled with twisted accidents and ethereal weirdness. *Stalker* itself is just as alien: a shooter that doesn't take the player softly by the hand and guide them through prescribed corridors. Instead, you're unceremoniously dumped on a hillside, left utterly alone to peer through the rain and fog. Are those shapes, moving on the horizon? Why's there so much metal tangled up on that bridge? And what the hell is that, gurgling in the darkness? The landscape feels haunted, by both abstract, sad memories and literal radioactive ghosts that enjoy chucking shit at you. And even if GSC's vision of Chernobyl is too spooky for you, there's a a wealth of mods to choose from that change the guns, the enemies – even the weather.

Chris Thursten: You are not the hero of *Stalker*: in fact, no one is. Despite the imperative objective you're given at the beginning of the game, there's never a sense that you are more important or powerful than anyone else. You're on a mission,

63 BATMAN: ARKHAM ASYLUM

Release: 2009 Last year: NE

Richard Cobbett: Yes, *Asylum*. *Arkham City* is a thing of beauty, but nothing beats the tightness of Batman's first outing. Him, trapped with his greatest enemies in a pressure cooker that constantly cracks and warps as you progress. You, finally feeling the power of the night's greatest predator. It turned stealth on its head and left it dangling from a handy gargoyle.

Tom Francis: Punching and kicking people is a core part of gaming, but as far as I can see *Arkham Asylum* is the only game to get it right. It's the only fighting game where I always hit the guy I mean to hit. It's the only one where my blows feel like they hurt, rather than just making someone freeze and lose a few hitpoints. And it's the only one where my character feels fluid and swift as he twirls between opponents, smacking and snapping them.

Chris Thursten: A rule for games: if all of your mechanics can support a challenge mode, you are doing things right. Rocksteady's genius is in creating interlocking systems – movement, combat, stealth – that could all be satisfying games in their own regard, and marrying them seamlessly. I'd argue that *Arkham City* actually does this better, but its triumphs are a revision of the groundwork laid here.

Tom Hatfield: What *Arkham Asylum* got right was to make stealth feel powerful. Batman doesn't keep to the shadows because he's fragile and easily killed (although he is) but because he's taking stock and planning his next attack. He doesn't hide, he *hunts*.

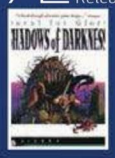
but so is everyone. You're good at killing, but so are the mercenaries and mutants that hunt you – hell, so is the environment itself. It's an exercise in making you realise how small and vulnerable you really are. The big ideas behind *Stalker* – the aimlessness of the universe, the constant striving towards the centre of something that has no centre – are embodied by the mechanics and structure of the game.

Richard Cobbett: I'm boycotting this one until they can say what *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* actually stands for. Which is a shame. I love the world and its atmosphere, but grammatical principles count!

Tom Hatfield: *Stalker* is one of the most atmospheric games ever made. The zone haunts you as you play, terrifying yet alluring. I lost count of the amount of times I quit, scared out of my wits, only to start it up again minutes later, too fascinated to stop.

72 QUEST FOR GLORY IV

Release: 1989 Last year: NE



Richard Cobbett: Two things stand out about this early adventure/RPG hybrid. The first is its world, and its glorious use of Slavic mythology to create a truly different fantasy. The second? One of the most sympathetic villains ever, whose relationship with the hero set a high mark that few other games have even tried to reach, never mind surpassed. Sniff.

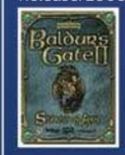
71 MOUNT & BLADE: WARBAND

Release: 2010 Last year: NE

Tim Stone: Hacking to death a heavily armoured professional soldier should be hard. Putting an arrow through the head of a fleeing bandit at 50 metres while riding a galloping horse should be hard. TaleWorlds grasped this and, even better, they realised that all the best picaresque adventures are self-quilled.

70 BALDUR'S GATE II: SHADOWS OF AMN

Release: 2000 Last year: 76



Tom Hatfield: A huge sprawling epic featuring masses of characters, hundreds of quests and a spell system you'd need to be an actual wizard to understand. *Baldur's Gate 2* is almost *too* big. The result is a game that is far less polished than BioWare's recent offerings, but the sheer scale of its ambition keeps me coming back.

69 PLANTS VS ZOMBIES

Release: 2009 Last year: NE

Tim Edwards: The best game ever about defending your garden/swimming pool/roof from a horde of rampaging zombies with a selection of angry vegetation. Popcap: I <3 you.

Rich McCormick: I didn't realise how differently you could play *PvZ* until I saw Tom F play it. He had intricate hallways of garlic and traps; I just wanged as many triple-peashooters down as I could and churned out mass firepower.

68 PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE SANDS OF TIME

Release: 2005 Last year: NE

Tom Hatfield: *Prince of Persia* did parkour before it was cool, suddenly introducing us to a whole new way of platforming, all fluid movement and clever routes. Making the jumps was seldom the tricky part; instead it was a puzzle, figuring out which move to use where to chart a pathway across the room.

All this makes for a good game, but it was the setting and characters that gave it a timeless charm. Taking the Arabian Nights for inspiration, The Prince narrates his own tale of how he, a pampered young noble, grew into a man. Playing *Prince of Persia* is like being wrapped up in a warm blanket and told the world's best bedtime story.

Rich McCormick: Get down from that roof, Prince of Persia, or you'll hurt yourself!

67 OMSI

Release: 2011 Last year: NE

Tim Stone: Railway enthusiasm may be in my blood, but I'd take this German bus celebration over any train sim you care to name. MSTS and RailWorks locos feel lifeless compared with the whining, lurching, throbbing MAN doubledeckers in *OMSI*. Driving through rainy Spandau in the rush hour still gives me *goosenbumpens* all over. ▶

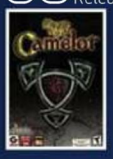
66 DARK CORNERS OF THE EARTH

Release: 2006 Last year: NE

Tony Ellis: "There he is!" "*Outsider!*" I don't think I'll ever forget the night I was hunted through the backstreets of Innsmouth, hiding from the flashlights of its deformed, shotgun-wielding citizens. And later, on the ship, when those *things* clambered over the side... Still fun to play today for all its flaws, this was a laudable attempt to capture the magic of Lovecraft in game form.

65 DARK AGE OF CAMELOT

Release: 2001 Last year: NE



Chris Thursten: You know what? Battlegrounds are rubbish. *DAoC* had open-world fortress-sieging PvP when *WoW*'s capture the flag mode was a twinkle in Blizzard's eye. Stalking the tundra of Odin's Gate with an army of other players remains one of my fondest gaming memories. An MMO well ahead of its time.

64 CALL OF DUTY 4: MODERN WARFARE

Release: 2007 Last year: NE

Tom Hatfield: The first *Modern Warfare* felt gritty and real in a way its sequels didn't. Levels like the AC Gunship had the eerie detachment of watching newsreel footage, rather than the bombast of an action movie. The twist is genuinely shocking in a way that the cheap tactics of the later games never approached.

62 WOLFENSTEIN: ENEMY TERRITORY

Release: 2003 Last year: 55

Rich McCormick: Splash Damage should make every game's multiplayer mode. Objectives keep the action moving across the battlefield, and the game's choke points are approachable from a variety of angles to ensure there are no stalemates. Ridiculously, it was free. Double-ridiculously, you didn't even need *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* to run it. Triple ridiculously, it's still as immediately enjoyable today as it was in 2003.
Graham Smith: Objective-based combat sounds complicated but my brother got his entire office playing *ET* when they realised it would run on shoddy old PCs.

61 SINS OF A SOLAR EMPIRE: TRINITY

Release: 2008 Last year: 85

Owen Hill: All the depth of a 4X game but in real-time and with co-op. My plans for galaxy domination usually involve heated arms races, political negotiations and alliances destined to break within 15 minutes of play. The mods also rule: *Borg vs The Rebel Alliance*? Praise PC gaming!

60 RED BARON

Release: 1990 Last year: NE

Tim Stone: It's a tough call. Did the flightsim peak in 1990 with *Red Baron* or 2000 with *Crimson Skies*? For my money, *Red Baron*'s campaign with its beard growing, plane painting, and pulse-propelling challenges from enemy aces is charming and endlessly replayable.

59 FALLOUT 3

Release: 2008 Last year: 27

Tom Francis: Such a brilliantly wonky world, brought to life more tangibly than in its 2D predecessors. Post-apocalyptia has lost all novelty in gaming, but Fallout's wasteland stays beautiful and intriguing to explore. A version of the 1950s thrust so suddenly into the future that it outright broke, leaving burbling Robbie the Robots waddling around its cracked up landscape, travelling plasma gun dealers with third degree radiation burns, Cole Porter tutting about indecency on the wristmounted radio.

57 GRAND THEFT AUTO IV

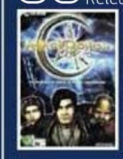
Release: 2008 Last year: 100

Graham Smith: It's a cliché that a game world is a character in itself, but *GTA IV*'s metropolis is perhaps the only to have its own personality. Liberty City is exciting, huge, and a complete dick. It's exciting just to explore, and all you need are the excuses to go do it. I suggest picking your own objectives, rather than relying on the shoddy acting of the mediocre crime movie that forms its plot.

Try ragdolling from the tallest building, stealing helicopters from the airport, hopping into free-for-all multiplayer with friends to leap motorbikes over buses, and installing mods that let you be Superman, Spider-Man, or perform drive-bys from the DeLorean.
Tim Edwards: A DeLorean wouldn't be fast enough for an effective getaway from a drive-by shooting. Just saying.

56 ANACHRONOX

Release: 2001 Last year: 59



Tony Ellis: There's nothing else in gaming quite like this madly inventive interstellar adventure. One planet gets cut in half, another joins your party as a playable character. Slapstick humour rubs alongside genuine pathos, and the intergalactic currency of the future is the Canadian dollar. ("Hey," say the developers, "it could happen.")

55 BEYOND GOOD & EVIL

Release: 2003 Last year: NE

Tom Hatfield: *Beyond Good & Evil* drops you into a big open world packed full of quirky, anthropomorphic animals and intricate dungeons, while upgrades offer access to new areas that are hidden in plain sight. It's the closest thing that you'll ever see to a *Zelda* game on the PC, and it more than matches its console counterpart.

54 ULTIMA VII

Release: 1992 Last year: 10

Richard Cobbett: *Ultima VII* was a revelation at the time, and still stands out as one of the few RPG worlds that feel alive and/or lets you bake bread with the blood of a child's murdered father and then feed it to him. Unlike many games its age, it's even more playable now thanks to the Exult project, which brings higher resolutions and a much easier interface.

53 FOOTBALL MANAGER 2010

Release: 2009 Last year: 96

Tom Hatfield: *Football Manager*'s match engine is a unique creation, perfectly balanced between predictability and randomness. *Football Manager 2010* took that brilliance and made it accessible, finally making the arcane tactical interface usable by regular mortals. *Football Manager* is the most addictive game in the world, and *2010* made it easier than ever to get hooked.

Rich McCormick: *Football Manager 2007* is better, because for some reason, Leroy Lita is incredible. That's the series' best bit: finding unheralded superstars.

52 FLIGHT SIMULATOR X

Release: 2006 Last year: NE

Tim Stone: Like a vast store of mothballed aircraft out in the American desert, an augmented install of *FSX* is a place that you could wander around for a lifetime and never see everything. Around every corner there's a new masterfully modelled ride or region waiting to be explored.

51 ANCHORHEAD

Release: 1998 Last year: 67

Tony Ellis: A text adventure is an intimate thing. It's just you and a story in the dark, bathed in the faint glow of the monitor. What better story to spend time with than a moody, understated and deeply unsettling Lovecraftian tale, set in a rainy New England town full of secrets?

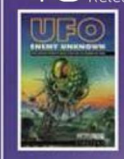
50 QUAKE 3 ARENA

Release: 1999 Last year: 51

Graham Smith: On its surface, we love *Quake 3* for its railgun, its rocket launcher, and the Q3DM17 map. Beneath that, there are infinite depths to mine if you want to become a better *Quake* player. How many seconds till that Mega Health respawns, and what route around the map will see you hit the chokepoints and be back in time to pick it up again before the enemy? If you don't know, the best thing to do is keep playing. *Quake 3* is slick, simple and pure, and there' are reasons why it was an e-sport.

49 UFO: ENEMY UNKNOWN

Release: 1994 Last year: 12



Richard Cobbett: There have been plenty of other turn-based strategy games, but none that nailed both the feeling of being in charge of a massive secret organisation and constantly riding the edge of disaster. The tipping point, where you realise that you're finally ready to quit playing defensively and go on the attack, remains one of the most beautiful gaming moments ever.

48 MEDIEVAL 2: TOTAL WAR

Release: 2006 Last year: NE

Tim Edwards: The basic *Medieval 2* is just a little bit too big, I think. Too much of Europe to colour in, too much faffing around with the Pope. If you want a proper bit of fun, play the *Kingdoms* expansion, which has four mini-campaigns.

One of them has you defending the UK from Vikings with a bunch of peasants. Another sees you on a more detailed crusade. Yet another lets you take over the Americas with a rag-tag bunch of conquistadors. By focusing on a smaller area, you get a better sense of the game's detail, and can enjoy more interesting decisions and consequences.

47 ASSASSIN'S CREED: BROTHERHOOD

Release: 2011 Last year: NE

Tim Edwards: Unbelievably, absurdly ambitious, *Brotherhood* drops you into Rome and lets you get on with buying up the city, one tailor, stable or monument at a time. Recruit a harem of assassins who'll dive out of haystacks or off the back of a horse and gut the guards, and spend thousands of florins on art.

46 FALLOUT 2

Release: 1998 Last year: NE

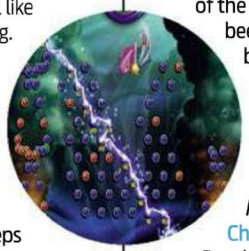
Tom Hatfield: The first time I visited *Fallout 2*'s New Reno I took steroids to win a prize fight, became a porn star, slept with a mob boss's wife, impregnated the same mob boss's daughter, became a mafia enforcer, killed the heads of four crime families and got away scot-free. New Vegas has nothing on this. ▶

58 PEGGLE

Release: 2007 Last year: NE

Graham Smith: A relaxing, rewarding blend of pachinko and pinball, where you fire a ball from the top of the screen and hope that its unpredictable bouncing leads you towards high-scoring pegs and power-ups.

It's almost random, but has just the barest lick of skill necessary to make its relentless praise and animal cheeriness feel like it's of your own making. It's a game that anyone can enjoy, whether you're playing it alone or projected fifteen-foot wide onto a wall at a party.



Owen Hill: *Peggle* keeps telling me I'm awesome. And I like thinking I'm awesome. Once you've started it, you'll never consider horses, beavers, or owls in the same way again. The most gleeful and moreish game I've ever played.

Tom Francis: *Peggle*'s scoring system is more interesting than you might realise if you blast through it shooting for the mission-critical oranges. There's an elaborate system of multipliers and ridiculous skill bonuses that means it's actually worth avoiding the pegs you're supposed to be hitting. There's nothing quite as gratifying as hitting a perfect ball on the pulsating double-helix level, and watching it rise through the pegs on a musical scale of pings that gets so high it threatens to damage your speakers.

Richard Cobbett: *Peggle* is one of the few games that I've been annoyed has not been continually whored out. One semi-sequel and some themed levels are not enough! I demand more *Peggle*!

Chris Thursten: *Peggle*'s precision-engineered reward mechanisms create a feedback loop that almost make me resent it for taking advantage of OH LOOK BEETHOVEN AND UNICORNS.

Tom Senior: The best use of Ode to Joy in any medium.

Rich McCormick: The best use of pegs in any medium.

Tom Francis: Best use of balls in the peg medium.

45 BIOSHOCK

Release: 2007 Last year: 34

Tom Francis: *BioShock* is great mainly for its vivid plot and the gut-wrenching twist at the heart of it.

But particularly later on, it's also a really creative and entertaining shooter: you can create whole playstyles around airblasting people into the ceiling, or tricking them into picking unwinnable fights with Big Daddies. *BioShock* has a huge set of tools that get more interesting the more you experiment, plus it looks spectacular

44 AGE OF EMPIRES 2

Release: 1999 Last year: 26

Rich McCormick: Or, wololo 2. *Age of Empires 2* hit some strange sweet spot for PC strategy gaming, embedding itself firmly in the brains of the world's players despite its seemingly sedate pace and a subject matter largely lacking in explosions.

The result is an oddly calming strategy game that caters to experimenters. What happens if I throw some villagers at that brick wall lined with archers? Cool, they all fall over! Again!

43 THE WITCHER 2

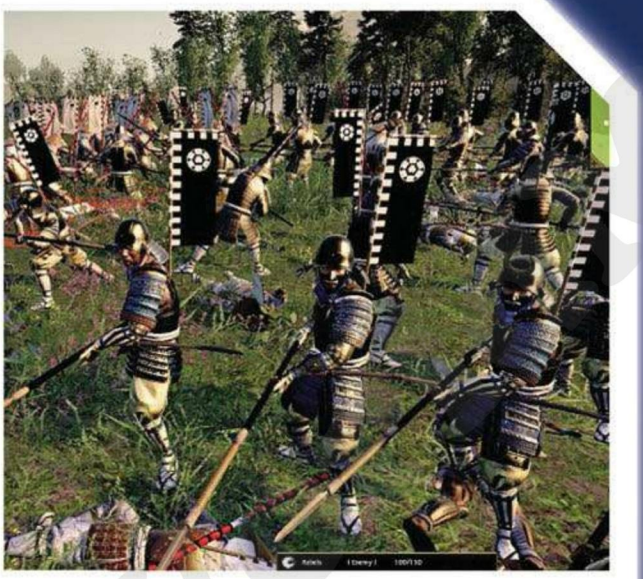
Release: 2011 Last year: NE

Richard Cobbett: One of the most passionate games you'll ever play, and my personal RPG of the year in a year that contained *Skyrim*. It's adult in all the right ways, with a commitment to making your decisions matter unlike anything else. They didn't have to make two completely different second acts; but they wanted to, so they did. (If only they'd made a better ending...)

Tom Francis: The significance of the choices you get to make in *The Witcher 2* isn't obvious at first – it feels like fairly traditional monster-slaying fare. But by Act 2, you start to realise that everything from the city you're in to the life and death of its rulers is now a consequence of something you've done. And the rich history of these places finally starts to become relevant to what you're doing, in a way that makes it interesting to uncover

Tom Senior: Geralt seems to be the same grizzled warrior we've played a thousand times before in RPGs, but as soon as you realise that he invented the mysterious 'Witcher Code' he lives by as a way to fob off contracts that seem too cruel or dishonourable, he suddenly seems a lot more likeable.

Most of *The Witcher 2*'s main characters surprised me in some way, and there's an unusual authenticity to their camaraderie that's hard to find in most other RPGs. Their story is told in a beautiful world that's a complete pleasure to explore. It's more linear and constraining than *Skyrim* but, in its best moments, it's every bit as spectacular.



32 TOTAL WAR: SHOGUN 2

Last year: NE Release: 2011

Tom Senior: *Total War*'s heady mix of grand strategy, turn-based empire building and real time battles threatens to overwhelm anyone who steps into the war room for the first time. *Shogun 2* reigns in the sprawling ambition of Empire and Napoleon and delivers the player a more concentrated, engaging experience than both of them. It lets us create tales of death, glory and conquest with history's most revered warriors.

Rich McCormick: *Shogun 2* is the first *Total War* game that manages to be both beautiful and functional. And ridiculous. Dudes dressed as lacquered demons strapping balloons to their back? Fighting among fallen cherry blossom? If it didn't actually happen, you'd swear that Creative Assembly invented the whole thing as an excuse to make a game.

Richard Cobbett: I have never been sadder to be the world's worst strategy gamer. I look at *Shogun* and I feel incredible lust. Then I look at my soldiers just killing themselves to save time, and I realise... no. I have to think of their welfare: they're better off if I just watch some anime in my darkened room instead.

42 FREESPACE 2

Release: 1999 Last year: 28

Richard Cobbett: Not many games have the honour of being unequivocally 'the best' after over a decade, but *Freespace 2* is the best space shooter of all time. It's epic in scale and beautiful in design – sad as we are that space combat has largely died out, at least it did so on a high. And that's ignoring the awesome fan community that has kept it alive and updated all this time. We salute you.

41 SUPER STREET FIGHTER IV: ARCADE EDITION

Release 2011 Last year: NE

Owen Hill: Why is *Street Fighter* the only fighting game in our top 100? Because it's the only one that prioritises mind games over muscle memory, no matter what your skill level is. Whether learning to toss your first fireball or mastering a 30-input combo string in a training session, this is the definitive version of the ultimate fighting series. And it'll make you feel like a badass.

40 VAMPIRE THE MASQUERADE: BLOODLINES

Release: 2004 Last year: NE

Chris Thursten: It's rough around the edges, but *Bloodlines*' evocation of vampire-occupied Los Angeles is unlike anything else. There are some extraordinary set-pieces, particularly the haunted hotel sequence, and the attention paid to creating different experiences for every bloodline makes it one of the most replayable immersive sims ever made.

Tom Hatfield: *Vampire* is so deep that almost all the dialogue is completely rewritten if you choose to play as a crazed Malkavian. Grit your teeth through the awful combat – the rest of the game is worth it.

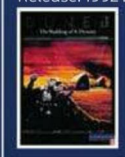
39 MIRROR'S EDGE

Release: 2009 Last year: 90

Tom Francis: Games are always a mix of art and technology, but not many fuse them as beautifully as *Mirror's Edge*. The lighting tech makes its dazzlingly clean city blare with colour, and it's one of the most captivating virtual places to run around. It's a happy bonus then that so much of the game *is* about the pleasure of running around.

38 DUNE 2: BATTLE FOR ARRAKIS

Release: 1992 Last year: NE



Tom Senior: The real-time strategy genre owes an astonishing debt to *Dune 2*. *Command and Conquer* has barely changed since the original nicked the format wholesale, but even today *Battle for Arrakis* does things that no RTS has done since. The planet the three asymmetrical factions are fighting for barely tolerates their presence. Arrakis' sandstorms gradually tear down your buildings. Colossal sandworms patrol the deserts, swallowing your most powerful units whole. You must battle the planet as well as enemy troops if you want to claim complete control of Arrakis' precious Spice. It even has a branching campaign map. *Dune 2* was years ahead of its time.

37 BATTLE OF BRITAIN 2: WINGS OF VICTORY

Release: 2005 Last year: NE

Tim Stone: *Steel Fury* gave me an inkling of what it was like to command a T-34 on the Eastern Front. *Silent Hunter 3* thrust me into the dank, claustrophobic world of a U-boat captain. But only one game, thus far, has given me an idea of what it was like for those 1940 RAF pilots, who, emerging from cloud cover, found themselves gazing at a firmament teeming with Luftwaffe planes.

36 ARMA X: ANNIVERSARY EDITION

Release: 2011 Last year: 13

Owen Hill: Emergent play and personal freedom are not usually associated with military sims, but they are key to *ARMA*'s success. Play it straight or strap an RPG launcher to a herd of goats and see how long you can last – the choice is yours. It's beautiful too, in its own hyperrealistic way. And, thanks to the numerous mods, you'll never play the same mission twice.

35 COMBAT MISSION: BEYOND OVERLORD

Release: 2000 Last year: 35

Tim Stone: While everyone else was jumping on the careering RTS bandwagon, Battlefront were breaking down World War 2 skirmishes into improbably tense 60-second chunks. Plot your moves, press Go, then squirm in your seat while a minute of uncannily plausible 3D combat unfolds. The combination of influence and impotence captured the duality of command perfectly.

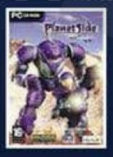
34 UNREAL TOURNAMENT

Release: 1999 Last year: 24

Tim Stone: Creaking pirate galleons, wind-buffeted mountaintop monasteries, drifting satellites... *Unreal Tournament* had atmosphere and variety that its golden brown rival just couldn't match. It was no slouch in the armoury and AI department either. Scampering through Turbine with a minigun-armed Loque hot on your heels could be every bit as exhilarating as crossing pulse beams with a live foe.

33 PLANETSIDE

Release: 2003 Last year: 44



Rich McCormick: Remember the time we loaded up a dropship with eight people, secured a Reaver escort and flew out to Cyssor to secure a vital base and stem the Vanu tide? Remember when we hacked a Prowler and held off a Terran Republic assault in the jungles of Hossin? If you played *Planetside*, you'll remember. And you will remember for the rest of your life. Battles can involve hundreds of players in a single fight. *Planetside* is less a game, and more a digital heroism generator.

31 THE CURSE OF MONKEY ISLAND

Release: 1998 Last year: 83

Tom Hatfield: *Monkey Island 3* is here for one simple reason: it's funny. Very, very funny. Sure, the puzzles are great too, but what keeps me coming back is the constant barrage of brilliantly written jokes expertly delivered by a great voice cast.

30 BATTLEFIELD 3

Release: 2011 Last year: NE

Tom Senior: There's no denying that *Battlefield 3* has suffered greatly from a shoddy launch, but when it works, it gives us a glimpse into the future of online shooters. The epic hour-long battles on *Battlefield 3*'s biggest maps unfold with a level of intensity that only a cutting-edge modern engine can deliver. Fighting through all that noise and fury with a squad of friends offers moments of unrivalled brilliance. The guns are more fearsome, the levels are busier than ever and fighter jets make a spectacular return. It sounds unbelievable, too. Turn on the War Tapes option in the sound menu and prepare yourself for some of the crunchiest, most satisfying explosions in PC gaming.

29 SID MEIER'S CIVILIZATION IV

Release: 2006 Last year: 16

Tim Edwards: Take a moment to savour the optional complexity in *Civ*'s strategy. Can you micromanage an economic advantage over your nearby rivals by shifting your populace around from the fields to the ancient era science labs? Can you befriend a local nation by adopting their religion, or bribing them with gifts? Can you engineer your ascent to the head of the United Nations just by being nice, or should you back up threats with nuclear weapons? *Civ* lets you simulate the rise and fall of an empire, from caves to space. It never overwhelms, yet offers staggering depth.

28 OPERATION FLASHPOINT: COLD WAR CRISIS

Release: 2001 Last year: NE

Tim Stone: I am a desperate man being chased by angry men through a huge forest. The men are angry because I decimated their convoy with satchel charges. I am desperate because I parked my getaway Skoda in a clearing and now I can't find it. The forest is huge because the wonderful nutters at BIS decided to give us massive multi-hectare islands to play war in.

27 PORTAL

Release: 2007 Last year: 8

Tim Edwards: Solve puzzles by making holes in stuff and walking through them. 'Bwoop.' There's a hole. 'Bwoop.' There's another. A thousand bwoops later, and there's a hole in your heart. It may only be a few hours long, but it's charming, delightful and adorable.

Tom Hatfield: Every time you solve a puzzle you think, "I'm a genius, no one else could ever have figured this out!" They have done. of course, but that doesn't stop *Portal* making you feel special.

Rich McCormick: Just like me, hey Tom? I hate puzzles, they make me feel stupid. *Portal* made me feel clever, even when I was being secretly stupid. Whatever infernal machine generates Valve's puzzle rooms, let's hope it stays friendly to humanity for a good long while.

26 RAINBOW SIX VEGAS 2

Release: 2008 Last year: NE

Tom Francis: An almost perfect shooter: as tense and brutal as *Counter-Strike*, but with a fluid and reliable cover system, randomised co-op terrorist hunts that surprise every time, and a trashy but enjoyable campaign that you can play through with a friend. Deeply satisfying weapons, highly customisable loadouts, thoroughly stupid plot.

25 COUNTER-STRIKE

Release: 1999 Last year: 18

Graham Smith: Years of updates and community feedback have turned *Counter-Strike* in to the most balanced multiplayer shooter in the world. There isn't an ounce of fat hanging from the maps and weapons, and if you want to test your skills at clicking heads, there's nothing quite as pure as running around de_dust with a Colt M4A1 or an AK-47.

24 DAY OF THE TENTACLE

Release: 1993 Last year: 58

Richard Cobbett: The best adventure game ever? It's in the running. What's not in question is that it's by far the best *designed* one. *DOTT* is the ultimate 'puzzle box' adventure, expertly clicking together the most warped cartoon logic and making it run like the most carefully engineered clockwork. And it does it while being hilariously funny.

Tom Hatfield: The time travel puzzles were as clever as they were hilarious. Need to get a hamster to your friend in the future? Cryogenically freeze it in a ice box you know will still be there later. Adventure game logic at its best.

Richard Cobbett: But don't try it at home. Or thawing it in a microwave.

23 DIABLO 2

Release: 2000 Last year: 7

Tom Francis: *Diablo*'s neatly trimmed take on the action RPG is still constantly satisfying to play. It's not just about finding precious loot: every character class has some killer mix of abilities that feels amazing to unleash on huge hordes.

22 SPELUNKY

Release: 2009 Last year: 71

Tom Francis: The way *Spelunky* randomises its levels really does change the way it plays each time. It's largely thanks to the items: the guns, capes, bombs, knives, jetpacks and weird artifacts you can find completely change your play style. So it always feels fresh, and every time you start it, it feels like something amazing is about to happen.

Graham Smith: The world's best roguelike. *Spelunky* takes everything that's good about the genre – the threat of permanent death, the randomised worlds, the wonderful excitement of a newly discovered item – and makes it accessible with cute graphics and side-scrolling platform mechanics.

21 COMMAND & CONQUER: RED ALERT

Release: 1996 Last year: 77

Tim Edwards: I've no idea who thought that a top-down strategy game set during an alternate reality in which Einstein erases Hitler from history in an effort to avoid WW2, but allows a major, more dangerous war between East versus West to develop, was a good idea for a sequel to *Command and Conquer*. But they were bloody right. Well done, anonymous person.

Owen Hill: Staring into the real-life face of Kane was a humbling experience. As was dialling up a friend's home to play online multiplayer before getting ambushed by a load of Soviet tanks. And I fancied Tanya more as a brunette.

20 OBLIVION

Release: 2006 Last year: 3

Tony Ellis: If *Skyrim* is the wild new frontier of fantasy gaming, *Oblivion* is its hinterland: prosperous, settled, civilised. Distinct enough to stand on its own in the PCG Top 100. It's a place I've come back to again and again, and yet after five years it's still rich with the promise of dungeons I've yet to explore, quest cycles I haven't completed. I should probably get around to closing those Oblivion gates sometime, too.

Rich McCormick: I love *Skyrim*, but I don't know it yet like I know *Oblivion*. I know the swamps around Bravil, the wind of Bruma, the sunset at Anvil. Cyrodiil is Tamriel's heart, and it's still lodged firmly in mine.

Tom Francis: Vomit.

19 HITMAN: BLOOD MONEY

Release: 2006 Last year: 21

Tom Francis: *Hitman* has always had a cool set of abilities: disguise yourself, kill quietly, manage suspicion. But *Blood Money* in particular shows how much more rich and exciting that formula can be with the right levels. Every mission has been worked and reworked until the routes, tricks and opportunities feel endless. That's why it has stayed exciting to play so much longer than any of the others.

Graham Smith: A rare action game that encourages you to play a certain way – by being undetected and efficient – but has the good graces to let you fail. Half the fun of *Hitman* is getting away with your assassination. The other half is screwing up, panicking, and working to clean up your own mess.

18 ROME: TOTAL WAR

Release: 2004 Last year: 6

Tim Edwards: Which house did you choose? I went for the Julii for my first game, expanding out through Northern Italy, France, and eventually Britain. My armies were bogged down in the brutal winters, while my Roman rivals Scipii and Brutii romped around the balmy Mediterranean basin. Turning back in on Rome when they called for my overly successful head remains the greatest moment in my gaming career so far.

Tony Ellis: Rome outlaws you, and suddenly it's you against the armed might of the entire ancient world. I used to go to bed at night and lie awake worrying about my empire.

17 SUPREME COMMANDER: FORGED ALLIANCE

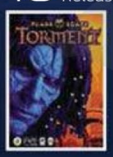
Release: 2007 Last year: 48

Tom Francis: *SupCom* made all kinds of smart tweaks to the RTS, but one of the most satisfying is really simple. Units get tougher, and repair themselves faster, the more kills they have. So they live to kill again, and to level up again, and to kill again. It makes a good tactic doubly satisfying: not only did your units survive, they got *better*.

Graham Smith: *Supreme Commander* has very little interest in forcing you to micromanage attacks, memorise build orders or play with anything resembling nuance. Instead, it offers everything I want from a strategy game: a huge battlefield upon which to use enormous robots to cause epic destruction. It's no less mentally taxing than other strategy games, but it replaces scouting with a single unit with the bombast of hundreds.

15 PLANESCAPE: TORMENT

Release: 1999 Last year: 19

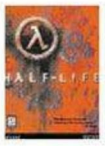


Richard Cobbett: What can change the nature of a man? It's the question at the heart of *Planescape: Torment*, and the perfect one for its mix of tragedy, philosophy and regret-tinged RPG questing. Just look at your party: a talking skull, the spirit of vengeance, a puritanical succubus... It's one of the smartest games ever, and one that you'll never forget.

Tony Ellis: *Planescape*'s baroque world is a hundred times more fantastical than the mundane medieval setting of all those other fantasy RPGs. Its fiction is richer and stranger than their tedious made-up lore about elves and kings. *Planescape* was the exciting and intelligent new direction for fantasy RPGs that no one followed up on.

16 HALF-LIFE

Release: 1998 Last year: 14



Rich McCormick: I remember when I first saw one of *Half-Life*'s barnacles. "A rope!" I thought. "I'll climb that hey why am I going up OH GOD WHAT'S THAT?" Look today at their fleshy mass and they're a smeary, formless mess compared with contemporary enemies. But get yanked upwards by one and you'll *still* feel that same rising wave of panic. *Half-Life* still manages to make its secret underground research facility filled with scientist clones and teleporting monsters feel *real*.

Chris Thursten: Way back when, 'scripted sequence' wasn't a dirty phrase, and *Half-Life*'s pace and spectacle is why. It didn't need to take control away to tell you a full story, a feat few games have managed since. That scientist getting dragged into a vent is the precursor of every civilian we've ever seen die in *Call of Duty*, and I know which game I'd still rather play.

Richard Cobbett: *Half-Life* was one of those rare games that made everything before it suddenly impossible to play any more. It put you right in the middle of the action, never wasted a moment and made it all seem so effortless, it's easy to forget how revolutionary its innovations were.

Tim Edwards: Listen, *Black Mesa: Source* people. You've had your fun, taunting us with pictures of *Half-Life* re-rendered in today's Source engine. Now, sort your life out and release it. For nostalgia's sake. For our sake. And for your sake.

14 LEAGUE OF LEGENDS

Release: 2009 Last year: 70

Tim Edwards: Of all the *DOTA* clones out or coming, *League of Legends* is the game we always return to. Why? Because it's free, for a start. Because it's not just a super-straight port of the famously newbie-hating *DOTA* – there are small changes to the way your heroes hit the creeps as they crawl up or down the map, to ensure that new players can't drag their team of five down. It's because it's as varied as *Team Fortress 2*, with a constant supply of shiny new heroes to crack open the enemy base. And it's because everyone is playing it: *League of Legends* is comfortably now the biggest game on PC.

Owen Hill: An e-sport that'll run on your laptop. The lore is ridiculous, though oddly coherent, and it's got one hell of a steep learning curve. But *LOL* has redefined free to play for a generation of gamers who enjoy the competitive, team-based action that comes with all *DOTA* clones. Riot didn't need to regenerate their game with the more accessible, snappier Dominion mode a few months ago. But they did anyway.

13 MASS EFFECT 2

Release: 2010 Last year: 42

Tom Hatfield: *Mass Effect* was a great RPG, but its stat-driven gunplay never really satisfied. The sequel matches BioWare's signature writing with combat as good as any third-person shooter. Darker, more streamlined and starring a fascinating cast of characters, *Mass Effect 2* doesn't deliver as strong a story as the original, but exceeds it in nearly every other way.

Tim Edwards: It's the Dirty Dozen, but in space! Get your team together, fix their problems and then send them to their almost certain doom. Except this time round the dirty dozen includes a weird frog man, a genetically altered lady in absurdly tight trousers, and a robot. Best. Dirty. Dozen. Ever.

Tony Ellis: Sometimes, when she's talking about Serious Stuff, Miranda's bum practically fills the screen. This is a good thing. Seriously. In creating a game for adults, it would have been easy for BioWare to fall into the trap of being po-faced and worthy. They don't. They say "stop trying to pretend you only like Miranda for her intellect. You like her bum."

Rich McCormick: *I* like her for her intellect. I prefer *Tali's* bum. The full body germ-o-suit gives her a certain mystique. I really, *really*, hope she's not a horrible gribbler under there.

12 COMPANY OF HEROES

Release: 2006 Last year: NE

Tim Edwards: Five years after release, *Company of Heroes* still manages to impress. The opening mission is madness: bringing tiny little men up the beaches of Normandy, as dug in Axis fling hell into the beach below. The violence on display is still remarkable – legs and arms go pinwheeling into the air, while torsos scatter in the opposite direction. And it just gets better from there.

Legend has it the *Company of Heroes* team spent a year just working on the awesome Defending Carentan mission, and it shows. It's a relentless assault. German Panzers gradually whittle away at your defences, while you desperately try to organise a retreat. *StarCraft II* may have the best multiplayer of any RTS out there, but for my money, I'd choose *Company of Heroes'* awesome singleplayer campaign over Blizzard's any day.

Tom Hatfield: Everyone knows how to play an RTS: if your opponent makes rocks, you mass-produce paper. Not so in *Company of Heroes*. A machine gun will slaughter riflemen head on, but if the infantry can outflank it, or lob a grenade, they'll win. Forget hard counters, this is a game of hard tactics.

Tom Senior: I quite like the tanks. ▶

11 DRAGON AGE: ORIGINS

Release: 2009 Last year: 40

Chris Thursten: It had the luxury of growing organically over a long development period, and that's why we're unlikely to see *Origins*' like again. Huge but personal in a way that *The Elder Scrolls* games have yet to capture. I cared about these people and their muddy brown world.

Tony Ellis: Commendably high production values, but BioWare's much-vaunted 'unique world' turned out to be just another mishmash of elves and orcs. Sorry: *genlocks*.

Tim Edwards: Morrigan should wear more clothes.

Rich McCormick: You know you can just *put* more clothes on her, right?

Tim Edwards: Why would I do that?

Rich McCormick: General human decency? More importantly: massive stat buffs. Just avoid the silly hats.

10 LEFT 4 DEAD 2

Release: 2009 Last year: 62

Tim Edwards: Tired of the world and its shit? Fed up with something your boss, your loved one, your family, or the bus driver said? Angry and want to vent? That's what *Left 4 Dead 2* is for. There are zombies on the horizon, you're knee deep in boomer bile, and a smoker just appeared on the balcony.

In *Left 4 Dead 2*, there is no family, there is no boss, and there is no time for talking. But this isn't sheer nihilism. It's a four-player game, and if you can find the right team, it's the perfect game to restore your faith in humanity. You might have started the game in a crimson rage at your fellow man and all he stands for. But you'll end it with a heroic charge out of the safehouse, desperate to save a stranded stranger.

09 MINECRAFT

Release: 2011 Last year: 17

Tim Edwards: I hope players don't get put off playing *Minecraft* because of the vast scale of some of the more notable builds online. Yes, someone is trying to recreate Game of Thrones' continent of Westeros in-game. Yes, that guy made a to-scale replica of the Starship Enterprise. But I think there's more fun in making a more humble thing in your own private or shared world. A little amphitheatre crafted from a natural cave. Maybe a tram service down into your mine. Maybe a lighthouse. Playing and making, with your friends, is one of the most rewarding pastimes in gaming.

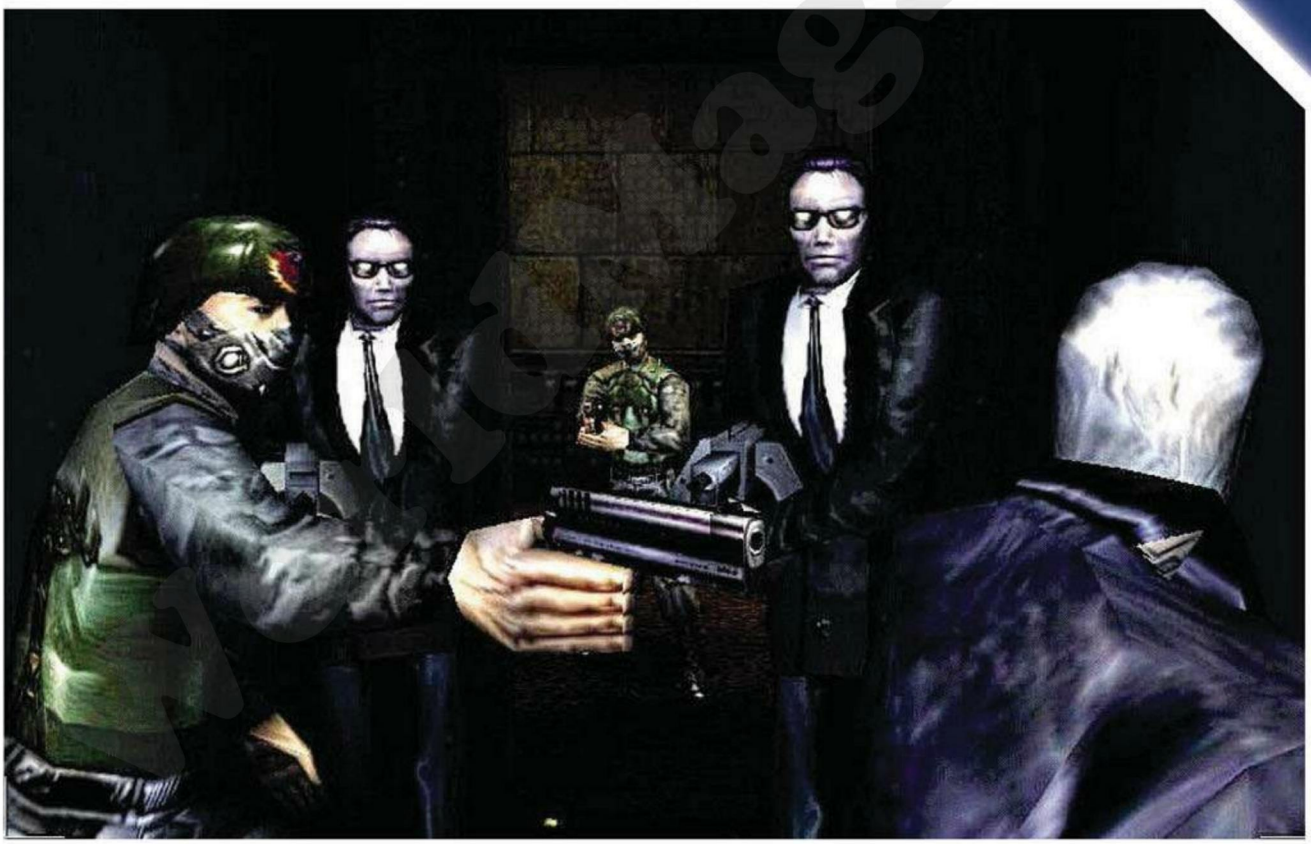
Graham Smith: *Minecraft* is an infinite sandpit in which to fulfil your childhood fantasies of being an explorer or a builder. It has no quests other than the tasks you set yourself, and completing your objective to build an underground waterfall, a seaside castle or an enormous sky-scraping penis is more satisfying than almost any other experience in games. Buy it for your mum, your kids and yourself.

08 HALF-LIFE 2

Release: 2004 Last year: 5

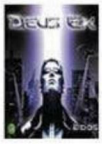
Tom Francis: Such an extraordinary collection of evocative places. The lonely shacks along Highway 17, the wet tunnels under Ravenholm, the spectacular dam before Black Mesa East.

Tim Edwards: Just a brilliant adventure, starring brilliant people, set in a brilliant location. It's the end of the world and it's up to you, your fanciable best friend and her robot dog to save the planet. Go! Why



04 DEUS EX

Release: 2000 Last year: 1



Tom Francis: The more great games come out, the more *Deus Ex*'s specific virtues come into focus. It's not the only game where stealth, shooting and exploration are all options. But it's the only one where the shooting is so dicey that you're desperate to avoid it, the stealth feels panicky and improvised, and exploration reveals clever ways to use the game's systems to trick and trap people. It's a near-perfect formula, and one we've never completely recaptured.

Tom Hatfield: Half the fun of *Deus Ex* is talking about it afterwards. Did you go in through the window or out the door? Frontal assault or crawl through the vents? Even now, years later, someone will tell me about a completely new way to approach a problem and I'll rush back to the game, desperate to see if it really works.

Rich McCormick: I imagine *Deus Ex* now as a kindly grandpa. He's happy now in his old age. His kids have all grown up and finally acknowledged his influence on their lives.

His grandkids are putting on his trenchcoat, sticking their arms out, and running around the house. "Mummy, look, I've successfully incorporated choice into my narrative! I'm just like Grandpa *Deus Ex*!" "Daddy, I *can* have a rewarding progression system and centre my game around shooting people. Did you see, Daddy, did you see?" *Deus Ex* smiles, his life's work almost complete.

isn't this number one, anyway? Who approved this nonsense? This chart is a farce.

Graham Smith: The gravity gun! How many first-person shooters really make significant advances in weaponry? By taking new technology – physics! – and sticking it in the core of the game, *Half-Life 2* creates combat scenarios that are unlike any others.

07 MASS EFFECT

Release 2008 Last year: 25

Tom Francis: *Mass Effect* is the best fulfilment of the quintessential nerd fantasy: captain a spaceship, explore the galaxy, get in fights. What the first game in particular gets right is your motivation: Saren totally shot that dude! He's getting away with it! The Council are letting him! To the attractively modelled spaceship!

Rich McCormick: The music makes it. You're hunched against your monitor, playing a campy space captain surrounded by dudes in lizard suits, interjecting into peoples' arguments to save their marriages. But the game's dark, buzzing theme music pulls it back from Star Trek silliness and makes *Mass Effect* cool.

Tom Hatfield: *Mass Effect*'s conversation system is a truly wonderful thing – more cinematic than any pre-rendered cutscene, yet totally interactive.

Chris Thursten: The endgame sets a standard for high-concept space hi-jinx that the sequel just can't match. Driving a tank through hyperspace? Check. Spacewalking up the inside of a space station the size of a city? Check. The best 'here come the cavalry' moment in gaming? Check, check, check, whoosh.

06 DEUS EX: HUMAN REVOLUTION

Release: 2011 Last year: NE

Tom Hatfield: A year ago the first *Deus Ex* seemed unique, unrepeatable, a freak accident of design. Then *Human Revolution* proved this gloriously wrong. Not only was this a new *Deus Ex* that stayed true to the non-linear spirit of the original, but it actually *improved* things. It seems that lightning can strike twice after all.

Tom Francis: *Human Revolution* doesn't give you *more* options than *Deus Ex 1*, but it does make each one much more fun to pull off. Shooting is punchy, sudden. Melee is brutal, absolute. Hacking is complex, tense. And stealth is smart, fluid and supported by an exciting stock of cybernetic tools.

Graham Smith: Adam Jensen initially seemed like kind of a dick – the kind of guy who would deliberately trim his beard into a pointy triangle. But *Human Revolution* is most surprising in just how good a roleplaying game it is. The tools and dialogue all give you a tremendous amount of choice in how you want to play, but they also give you the power to create and embody a character. I didn't ask for this, but I like it.

Rich McCormick: I only have one problem with *Human Revolution*: I wish there was more of it. The cities of Detroit and Hengsha offer so much, and leave me desperate for extra stuff.

05 STARCRAFT II

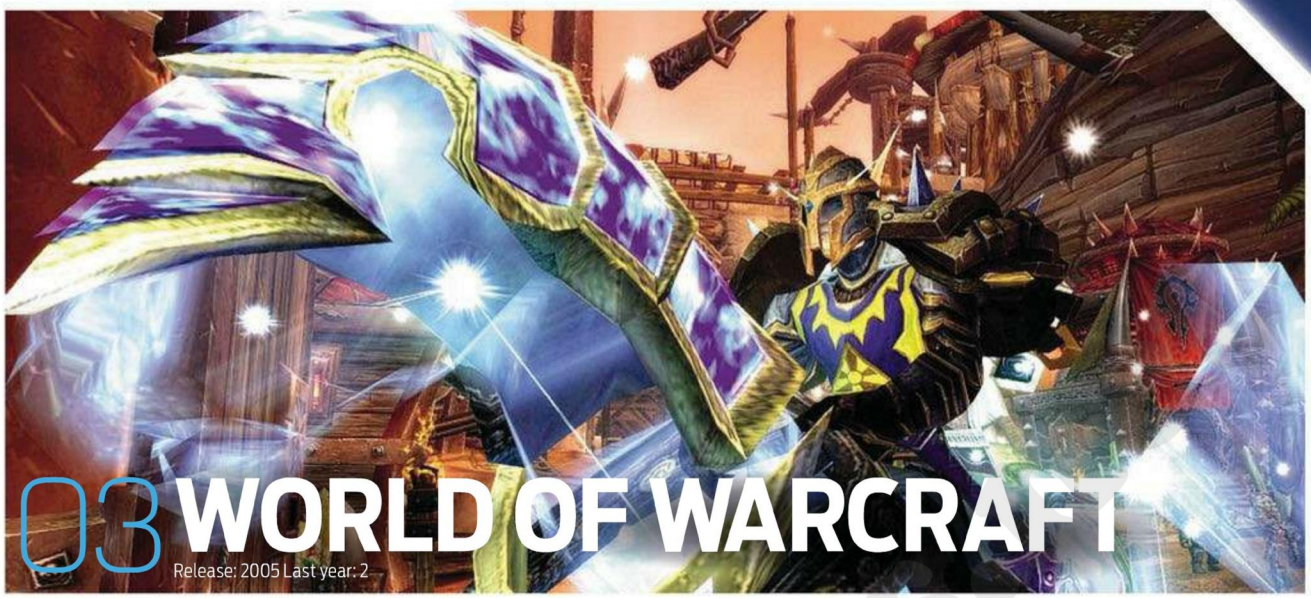
Release: 2010 Last year: 9

Tim Edwards: I look at the design of the Zerg, Protoss and Terrans and just gaze in awe. It took thousands of years to balance chess. It took Blizzard just half a year following release to get the the broad strokes of *StarCraft II* in place. And all the units are different for each side. And there are dozens of different boards. And you don't take it in turns to play. And the animation's better. Screw you, chess. We've got something so much better.

Tom Francis: Actually since the *en passant* rule was added in the 15th century, White has been OP.

Chris Thursten: *StarCraft 2*'s meticulous balance and mechanical complexity are what qualify it to be a sport, but they're also why losing a game never feels confusing or unfair. There's always something to be done about it, and that feeling of continual learning is incredibly satisfying. It's a misconception that it's only for those with their sights set on mastery, though: *StarCraft 2* is a game that everyone should play.

Rich McCormick: The only game that has ever prompted me to learn another language. Annyeong haseyo! *StarCraft 2*'s community is vast, expansive, and driving an entire sector of gaming. No other game has the power to do that.



03 WORLD OF WARCRAFT

Release: 2005 Last year: 2

Tim Edwards: There was a time, during the *Wrath of the Lich King* expansion, where raiding was the most fun you could have in any game, ever. Delving into Ulduar – still the best dungeon the *WoW* team has created – was an incredible adventure, one you looked forward to all week. The fights felt hard, but the mechanics were understandable. One scrap had you split your team: half to hold a gladiator's arena, the other to run a gauntlet of baddies to knock a boss off his pedestal. Another saw you fighting a magic lady with ferocious tiger guards. A third had you launching yourself via catapult onto the back of a tank while your team-mates poked it with dwarven APCs. *WoW* feels harder, more hardcore now and for that reason I've paused playing. But I miss it terribly.

Chris Thursten: Simultaneously so huge and yet so simple, *WoW* has grown to the point where just levelling from 1 to 85 isn't the measure of the experience. Trying and failing to take in everything the game had to offer eventually drove me to quit, but I can't fault it for that. I just wish I had time to play it.

Richard Cobbett: Hardcore RPG fans may complain about its simplicity these days, but ignore them. Blizzard's commitment to fun makes every expansion pack a must-play even for an antisocial mage like myself. Who else would throw a *Plants vs. Zombies* mini-game into their 'serious' MMO? Nobody. I can't wait to start levelling my pet collection in Pandaria...

02 TEAM FORTRESS 2

Release: 2007 Last year: 4

Tom Francis: The endless updates keep changing the way I play *TF2*, and once the Spy got a knife that refills his cloak meter, I became invincible. I use the Dead Ringer to fake my own death when shot – which also protects me from the damage – then get behind people and stab them in the back to recharge it. It's a vicious cycle of success, and it's one of many neat little sub-classes that keep *TF2* exciting four years on.

Tom Hatfield: *Team Fortress 2* remains the most relaxed and enjoyable multiplayer shooter ever made. It isn't about competition. It isn't even about kill/death ratios. It's about covering someone with a jar of your own piss and then laughing it off when they burn you to death for it. In *TF2*, no-one cares that much if they die or lose, as long as they're having fun.

Richard Cobbett: It's not a shooter, it's a party that's lasted years with no sign of stopping. Simply being able to jump in and know I'm not going to get shouted at for doing something stupid makes it one of the very, very few online shooters I continue to play by choice.

Graham Smith: *Team Fortress 2* is the perfect example of games-as-service. I've grown bored of it six times over, but each time I move to uninstall it, Valve deliver another full steaming plate of new items, modes and maps to try. It's gaming tapas.

01 SKYRIM

Release: 2011 Last year: NE

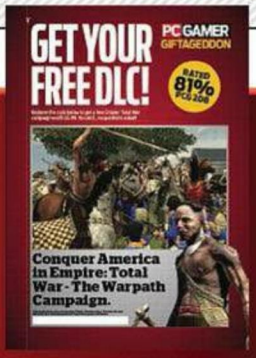
Tom Francis: The third *Elder Scrolls* game, *Morrowind*, was a hauntingly weird land filled with mushroom forests, giant flying jellyfish and buildings held in warped plants. *Oblivion* was a much more conventional fantasy: rolling hills, trees, human towns. Before it came out, *Skyrim* just looked snowy. Is that cool? I guess that's cool. In the end, the setting is what makes *Skyrim* so extraordinary. Not just the snow and ice, but the *mountains*: every view is a spectacular craggy skyline begging to be explored, hiding weird secrets and making the world feel limitless. There are other, more mechanical reasons why *Skyrim* is my favourite game in the *Elder Scrolls* series, but it's the excitement of exploring this endlessly interesting landscape that makes it my favourite game ever.

Chris Thursten: When the pieces fall just right, there's no beating *Skyrim*. The mixture of scripted encounters, sound design and dozens of interconnected mechanics make for stories that would have to be staged in any other game. It's a lesson for anyone who believes that games should be wholly scripted or wholly dynamic, and the rewards for imaginative engagement are enormous.

Richard Cobbett: My mage is awesome. The only thing more awesome than her? The world. Bethesda knocked it out of the park here, from the aurora borealis hanging over you as you fight dragons on ice fields, to the jaw-dropping scale of its fantasy cities. It's not just one of the best RPGs ever, it's one of the best worlds ever. I wish I lived there. As my mage.

Tony Ellis: The jagged mountains, the icy rivers, the rugged vistas of pine trees and snow – *Skyrim* has a sense of romance that you only find in the box-art of other fantasy games. Here, you live it. You're part of a world that continues, endlessly, in whatever direction you choose to walk. Yet as well as this freedom, you get to enjoy scripted adventures in handcrafted dungeons. It's the best of both worlds, and no other game offers as much.

GIFTAGEDDON!



We at PC Gamer are no strangers to world domination... and we also love *Total War* games, which is why our latest Giftageddon prize is a whole campaign for *Empire: Total War*. Play it, readers, and you'll learn how to hold off an army of technologically superior conquerors. Knowledge you'll need when our latest evil scheme comes to fruition. For more details on this great free DLC, including how to download it from Steam, see the bottom of the page.

Tim Edwards

TIM EDWARDS
EDITOR
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EMPIRE: TOTAL WAR
THE WARPATH CAMPAIGN

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Empire: Total War is a game about European colonists waltzing over to another continent, shooting the locals in the face and taking their land. *The Warpath Campaign* turns the tables, casting you as the native Americans, who must using cunning and local knowledge to defeat their technologically superior foes. Lack of resources and aggressive neighbours make *Warpath* a very different and far harder game than regular *Empire*. We thoroughly enjoyed the challenge, giving it 81% in PCG 208.

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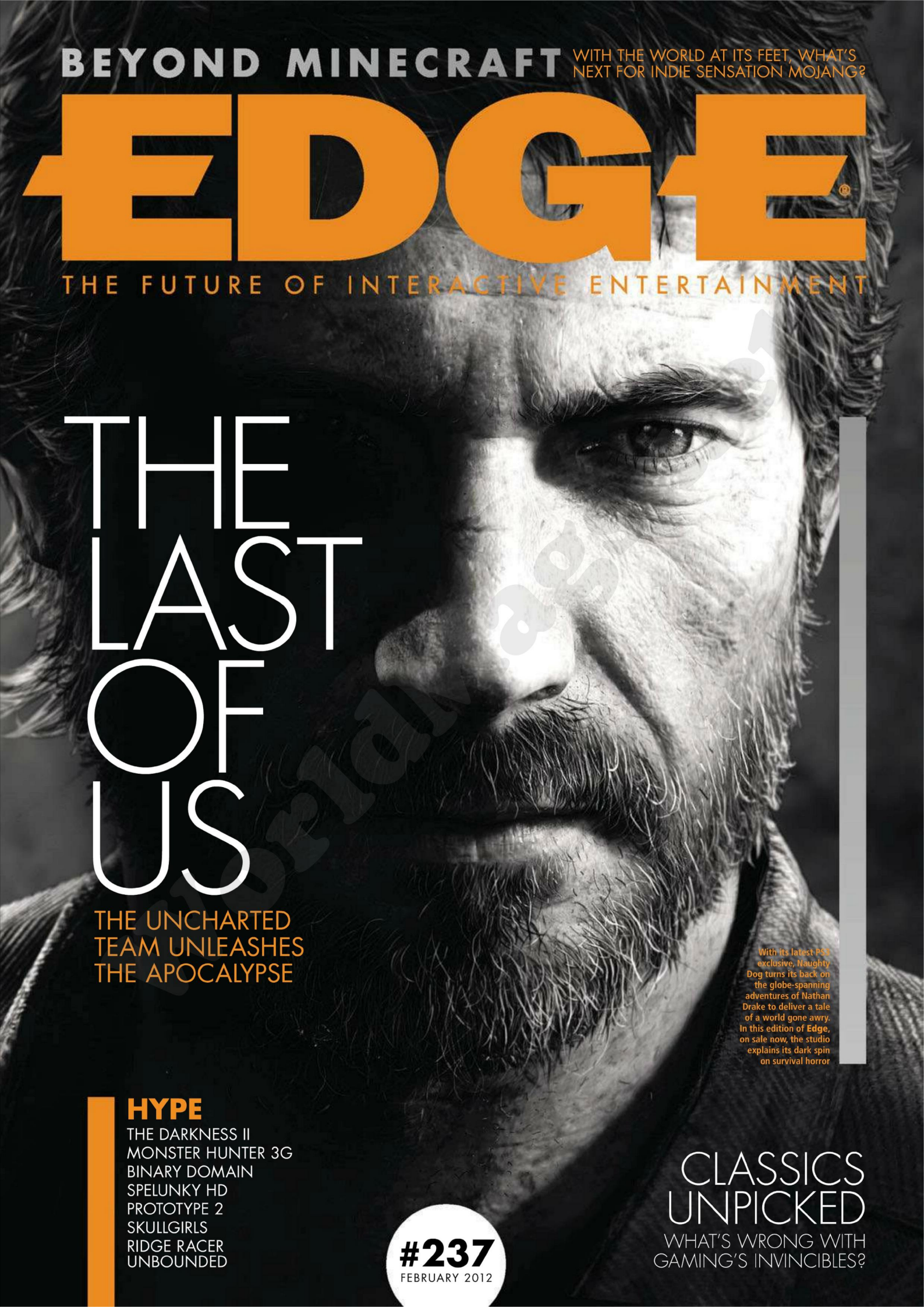
BEYOND MINECRAFT

WITH THE WORLD AT ITS FEET, WHAT'S NEXT FOR INDIE SENSATION MOJANG?

EDGE

THE FUTURE OF INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT



THE LAST OF US

THE UNCHARTED TEAM UNLEASHES THE APOCALYPSE

With its latest PS3 exclusive, Naughty Dog turns its back on the globe-spanning adventures of Nathan Drake to deliver a tale of a world gone awry. In this edition of **Edge**, on sale now, the studio explains its dark spin on survival horror

HYPE

THE DARKNESS II
MONSTER HUNTER 3G
BINARY DOMAIN
SPELUNKY HD
PROTOTYPE 2
SKULLGIRLS
RIDGE RACER UNBOUNDED

CLASSICS UNPICKED

WHAT'S WRONG WITH GAMING'S INVINCIBLES?

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Featuring car sims, beer-drinking and Obsessive Completion Disorder

SPK UR MND

■ I took all the books from *Skyrim* and formatted them into an ebook-friendly format. It's pretty amazing how much text was written to supplement the story telling of the world within the game. Download the Dovahkiin Gutenberg from at *bit.ly/vTdAve*.
Travis Brown
Anything's better than trying to read them in that awful in-game book form. A hearty HUN KAAR ZOOL to you, sir. With extra ZOOL.

■ Why couldn't Bethesda drop their pride and buy rights to the Dunia engine? The 'Creation' engine isn't that good; stand on top of a keep or castle and you can see carpet-tiled grass and water textures. The Dunia engine (*Far Cry 2*) is the finest engine ever to be had. They were so close. 'Creation' engine is so last gen.
John Imawesome
It's a safety measure. You know how awesome Skyrim *looks with its old engine? If they made that kind of jump, your eyes would melt, and take it from us, dribbly eye juice isn't fun to try and get out of a keyboard – especially when you can't see what you're doing.*

■ Your preview of *Overgrowth* says on numerous occasions that rabbits are the main protagonists when, in fact, all the screenshots depict HARES, not rabbits! Rabbits have floppy ears! Those are not floppy!
Martin Ward
Tsk. No need to split bunnies.

Genuine PC enthusiasts

Hi. Would just like to compliment you on the mag, fantastic that we still have genuine PC enthusiasts out there. My question is: when do you think we are going to get some good classic games remade – like *UFO* – without the developers messing around with what was already a great game? Perhaps just an update in graphics, instead of trying to make the game real-time and failing miserably! And games like *Dungeon Keeper*! I guess it's because there is no money from console players.
Michael O'Callaghan

Remember, if anyone asks: "X-What? Never heard of it."

Who needs console players? Only giant companies. Indie devs are even now working on at least three* X-COM *style games:* Xenonauts, OpenXcom *and* Xenowar. *It's not usually graphics that make these games feel old though – it's interfaces and other things that have evolved over time. Fixing those is more than a paint job.
PCG

Finally a wheel

I have been an avid reader of PC Gamer for several years now, and have recently enjoyed both your podcast and new website.

Are you fast enough to race with the sim crowd?

"*rFactor* and *Project CARS* have gone virtually unreported in PCG"

Two years ago I developed an interest in Formula One and subsequently discovered *rFactor*. Moving from keyboard to gamepad, and finally a wheel, I became immersed in the community of like-minded individuals who devoted so much time to practising and perfecting the art of sim racing.

Recently there have been two big announcements in the sim racing community. The first of these has been the announcement of *Project CARS*, and the second concerning the imminent release of *rFactor 2*, the sequel to arguably the most popular game in the sim racing genre. Unfortunately, both of these have gone virtually unreported by PC Gamer. *CARS* has only been mentioned in passing, and *rFactor* not at all.

I understand only too well that the sim racing genre is particularly niche, but would it be possible for PC Gamer to try and improve your coverage? No one is expecting in-depth articles to the extent of those written for the more mainstream games, but a simple mention to acknowledge them would be nice. Certainly, you've tried to cover some of the more niche aspects of PC gaming before, and I'm sure that the whole community would be grateful if the same coverage could be extended to us. If the problem is to do with simply being informed of these new

THE HOT MAIL

Obsessive completion disorder

I was wondering if anyone else shares my ailment? I have come to refer to this condition as OCD or Obsessive Completion Disorder! Any game that has a story mode turns me into a quivering wreck, and I can't allow myself to move on to another game until I've hit the majestic 100% figure.

It is worst in open-world games such as *Assassin's Creed* or *Grand Theft Auto* (1 of 97 birds killed... great), but *Mass Effect* is equally bad. So much mining.

With the recent glut of amazing games being released, the side effect is that the often fantastic multiplayer side of things (I'm looking at you, *Battlefield 3* and *Call of Duty*) gets ignored completely. I can't even allow myself to enjoy my time in the multiplayer of these games, with that gnawing 'Gay Tony isn't finished' feeling in the back of my mind.

Now I hear that *Skyrim* could essentially last forever, I don't know what I'm going to do... maybe that will be the cold turkey I need?
Ayden Sims

P.S. If my girlfriend reads this, Obsessive Completion Disorder is a gaming-specific condition that doesn't apply to washing up or general household chores.

We suspect your girlfriend will be more curious about how you plan to finish off Gay Tony. Cough.

We can't supply you with a comfy couch to sleep on, but here's a fine 32GB Corsair USB drive instead.
PCG

The best missive we receive every issue will win its sender a shock-proof 32GB USB drive worth £70, courtesy of our lovely friends at Corsair. Find out about these gadgets at www.corsair.com. See above for how to get in touch with PC Gamer!

releases then I'm sure the community can help.
Sam Binfield

We hear you loud and clear, Sam. The coverage of sims – both combat and non-combat varieties – is something we're keen to improve upon in this magazine, and the first thing to do is increase the amount of coverage. It's a complete coincidence that we're covering X-Plane and CARS this month, but we will devote more pages to the sim world in future. And yes, do tell what we should cover.
PCG

Until it's patched

I enjoyed reading your *Battlefield 3* review in the latest issue. It was an honest assessment of the game to this point. I couldn't agree more with you in regards to 'waiting until it's patched' before playing. I too can only manage around a round and a half before either the game freezes and I have to shut it down with Task Manager or it doesn't load the next level. I know most people are having this kind of trouble.

The community on the forums wants a response from DICE. We get none. Two weeks after release and no apology or fix? The state in which this game has been released on PC is a disgrace. How on earth did this game get through QA? I'm sure they would have had a detailed testing plan that covered all the outcomes. Surely testing the networking stability and functions would of been a top priority? I would have thought it vital to test such items. If it is an honest mistake then someone needs the sack, though more likely it had to be out by X and they thought they could patch it up. Well, patching it now just isn't good enough.

Even worse, my brother says the Xbox version is fine and its menus easy to understand. Why couldn't DICE manage a decent in-game menu system for the PC instead of that awful web browser? Sigh.
Lee Woodward

Patching is often tricky, the number of PC configurations out there making perfection almost impossible. Bad menus though, those are actively designed and inflicted on the gaming world. Grr. It's not as if things like 'mice' are almost-unheard of bits of technology the world has only just discovered, or that we haven't had practice doing things with them that don't suck harder than a Dyson in a quantum singularity. Ridiculous state of affairs.
PCG

Second favourite hobby

No doubt the release of *Skyrim* last week made people do some pretty intense things. Count me among them, because I celebrated the momentous occasion with my second favourite hobby, beer.

I work at a liquor store in the suburbs of Chicago that feature lots and lots of beers.

Urrrgh. Milk hangover.

"If this is an honest mistake then someone needs the sack"

Microbrews, imports, you name it. So I took my lunchbreak to scour the store-scape for beers that fit in with the adventure that would go on to consume the next eight days of my life and counting. But I couldn't just choose beers for their name; I had to find beers that were not only appropriate, but delicious.

Skullsplitter, Orkney Brewery: an axe-wielding viking on the front and hardcore malty goodness within.

Nosferatu, Great Lakes: because everyone has a vampire toon saved in their *Morrowind* folder. Contains lots of hops, a good bit of malt and absolutely no porphyric haemophilia.

Dragon's Milk, New Holland Brewing Company: because, let's face it, dragons in *Skyrim* are kind of a big deal. Aged in oak barrels, this stout is ready to own some face (or be poured into mine).

And then I play the game only to find out that all the Nords actually drink mead. Crap.
Chris Orris

YOU ARE MIGHTY HERO. We just bought some milk so that we could reply to the local insult of 'milk drinker' with "Yes? What of it?" Followed by fire.

TOP DRAW

While browsing our Christmas edition, you may have seen Nico Bellic running to hospital. If so, see a neurologist, because fictional characters shouldn't be doing that in the real world. If, however, you guessed it from that issue's Top Draw, like William Banks, have a cookie. The cookie is probably real. This month's scrawl is from Simon Rucka, and if you need a hint... tough! Submit your own to win a year's Zenio subscription to PCG.

Send your daubings to pcgamer@futurenet.com – the one we like the best wins a year's Zinio subscription to PC Gamer. No prizes for guessing the game, but the first to guess correctly gets their name in print.

SPK UR MND

Recently I've noticed that there are a worrying number of completely horrible people in some of the gaming communities we hold dear to us. "It's the internet, everyone is a dick," I hear you all say, true... yes. But why do people think it's OK to call others every name under the sun or to ruin people's enjoyment of games?
Mark Smith
Because they're dicks, that's why. Interestingly though, for all that people say that they've been called every name under the sun online, a quick office poll suggests that not one of us has been called Julian yet. Odd that.

I'm probably being really dumb but I can't seem to find the review archives on your website. For example, if I wanted to read your review of *Just Cause 2*, where would I find that?
Alec Turner
Unfortunately that review was written before we had a shiny new website to call our own, and there didn't seem much point putting up old reviews of games nobody was buying. We thought we'd get around to it one day – but never did. Yeah. Sorry.

Not sure how closely you are following the *Tribes: Ascend* development, but I've been a bit stunned by the dramatic changes they are making during the closed Beta, many of which seem directly taken from the forum posts of users. Not bug fixes and tweaks, but major game-changers. Really impressed by these developers.
Rick Reitano
Several of us on PC Gamer cut our online gaming teeth with Tribes, *and we're hoping that* Tribes: Ascend *proves to be a worthy successor. But unfortunately when two* Tribes *go to war, 1% is all we can score. That's probably going to balls up its Metacritic numbers, right?*

SEND

TXT UR REVIEW

Tweet your 140-character review to our Twitter account @PC_Gamer. Don't forget to include the game's name and a score.

Cave Story+
Epic everything but a bit short, but worth the money.
96%
ImmaReaper

Hearts of Iron 3
Score based on the fact I don't know what the hell I'm supposed to be doing.
??%
adroyle

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim
Amazing story to say the least, bugs and such can ruin the game, great mod support.
95%
TehIrishKing

The Last Express
Never felt more immersed in a video game. Emphasis on plot and character development pays off.
88%
SnowdonJames

And another 500 points of burdens for Lydia.
PCG

Surprise party

My husband is an avid *World of Warcraft* player. He has been dedicated to it for the last three-plus years. As I was trying to think of something *WoW*-related other than buying him time cards for his birthday, I remembered something he showed me a couple years ago. A fellow player had unexpectedly died, and his guild members had put together a funeral.

So, I thought, if an in-game funeral can be done, why not an in-game surprise birthday party? My husband, Joey-aka-Stonedove's birthday is December 19th. I am planning his in-game party for December 15th at 6 pm Central time in a pub in Stormwind (specific pub to be named later). Another member of his guild is helping me with the details since I will not have my own game account until the first of December and know very little of how to navigate the World. My husband is a die-hard *WoW* gamer. I would love if PCGamer could be a part of his special celebration and make his birthday surprise complete!
Shannon Miller

If only Blizzard could have been roped in. Imagine, there he is on Raid Night, when Deathwing himself swoops in. "PAIN!" he yells, as the world shakes. "AGONY!" shrieks his voice, in a tone that cracks mountains. "AND CAKE!" he adds, as an army of dancing Draenai pour out with fireworks.
PCG

American 'inflection'

I just want to express my concern at the current gap between your podcasts. In your absence, I had to go elsewhere to get my PC gaming fix. I stumbled across the podcast of your counterparts from the US. 'Amazing' was my reaction when I then saw that they do a WEEKLY podcast of the same length as yours. I am now

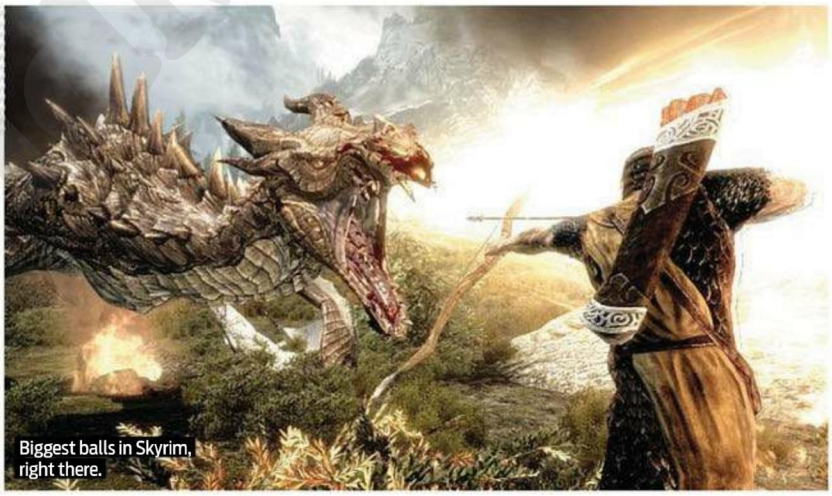
"In your absence, I had to go elsewhere to get my PC gaming fix"

subscribed to that lovely podcast, so get monthly updates automatically pushed to me. That's four hours a month of American. Four HOURS! While I'm not knocking the content, the delivery constitutes an audible health concern, with the following observed in the average hour innings: 87 'Dudes', 52 'Awesomes', and an uncountable number of sentences where I can't tell if they are questions or not, due to the American 'inflection'.

Please! Don't let a gap like this happen again!
Ayden Sims

YOU'RE PLAYING

Jon Morcom
Currently playing:
The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim


Biggest balls in Skyrim, right there.

I have just planted The Arse of Infinite Laziness into The Throne of Perpetual Time-Wasting, and for the ninth night in a row fired-up *Skyrim* on The Glowing Instrument of Digital Enlightenment.

Characters whose names appear to have been plucked at random from the IKEA catalogue are asking me to go here and fetch this or go there and slay so-and-so; quests are accumulating so fast, I think I'm going to have to sub-contract out some of the killing. But no job is too big or too small because I am a sneaky, thieving Wood Elf with a predilection for archery and I will happily turn anyone or anything into a pincushion if there's some gold or skill progression in it for me.

Horses may be the original 4x4s and ideal for the varied terrain in *Skyrim* but I have seen and experienced much more just walking through the gorgeous landscape. Bethesda's claim that Skyrim will spawn infinite dragons is no idle boast and I can't think of another game that generates as much excitement as when these magnificent beasts appear and attempt to snap-freeze or flambé you. And how refreshing to have these free range mini-bosses spawn randomly and to not have to fight them in an artificially enclosed space, or even at all.

The Wife of Limited Tolerance appears at my side. I fear that she is here to serve me with the Scroll of Divorceage but generously she asks if I want a cup of tea. White with two sugars, stirred with The Spoon of Ensweetenment please. I stand briefly to readjust The Enchanted Underpants of Involuntary Buttock Bisection and sit down again. My wife returns with the tea and I tell her that I may be some time.

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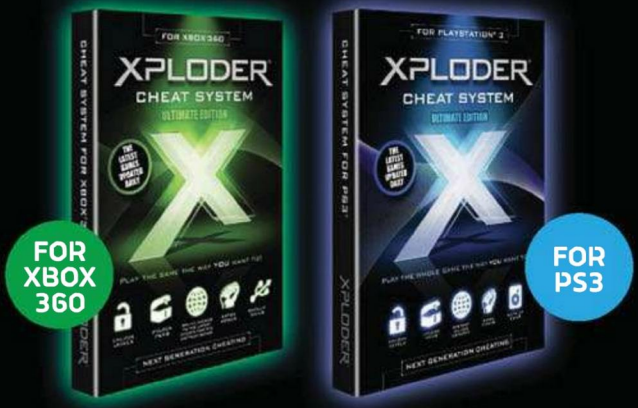

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PLAY

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Join the PC Gamer community, and together we can rule *The Old Republic* as, um. Not father and son. That would be weird.

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Assuming an average height of 1.6 meters, our 45,224-strong Steam community would stretch 45 miles if placed end to end. You could walk from London to Milton Keynes on a carpet of the friendliest, most able PC Gamers around. We have no idea why you would want to do that.

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IP: 85.236.100.18 **Port:** 27115
Our *Team Fortress 2* server isn't just a place to steal flags and knife snipers: it's a full-blown millinery industrial complex.

URL: bit.ly/pcgbf3
Back to Karkand has breathed new life into DICE's already excellent multiplayer shooter. Won't you join us?

HOW TO JOIN THE STEAM COMMUNITY

STEP 1
If you don't already have a Steam account, head to *www.steampowered.com*, download the client, run it and sign up.

STEP 2
Install your games from the Steam client. If you're having technical problems, hit the forums at the Steam site.

STEP 3
In the community tab of the Steam client, search for PC Gamer and join our group. Then chat, play and troll to your heart's content.

JAN

20
***TOR* one-month anniversary!**
Celebrate with a few Flashpoints.

28
January sales
Hunt for bargains in *Battlefield 3*'s Grand Bazaar.

FEB

07
***Crusader Kings II* released**
Compare the size of your kingdoms at *pcgamer.com/forum*.

14
Be mine
Hop onto *World of Warcraft* for the 'Love is in the Air' event.

15
PCG 237 released
Recover from the annual depression of Valentine's Day with our newest issue. We still love you.

PLAYER OF THE MONTH

Who? Archernick
Where? PCG Battlefield 3 servers
Why? Maintaining the servers and community.

Crucible of change

New *EVE* expansion welcomed by community

EVE's latest expansion, Crucible, has received a far better reception than Incarna, the expansion that 'ruined everything'. Our EVE Corp, PCG Enterprises, has welcomed it with open arms. "The new nebulae are stunning, as well as the new warp effects," said eggmeister on the PCG forums, although he did criticise the way it moved his bookmarks.

It feels like a good move from developers CCP, who have listened to player feedback after the Incarna catastrophe. Even if the new expansion has been described as little more than a glorified patch, many people commenting on our site have said they'd be tempted to return to their corporations. And if you need a corporation to join, the official PCG one needs all hands on deck.

PCG NEEDS YOU!

At the moment, PCG Enterprises are "working overtime to produce new battle cruisers," according to Sam Redshift, our intrepid *EVE* reporter. Mines are being mined as hard as they possibly can, and blueprints, er, blueprinted. If you want to help out they're still recruiting – see *bit.ly/pcgeve* for more information.

Standing in places is no longer the focus of CCP's efforts.

Looks like a laser battle, is in fact a mining operation.

THE PCG ANNUAL WOW AWARDS

Desolace's oasis formed the backdrop for the annual PCG *World of Warcraft* awards, presided over by our very own editor. Barkhoof picked up comedian of the year, Zalid was named Carebear of the year, and Belera scooped the prize for most versatile player.

Tim himself came second in the 'most missed player' category – we're not sure if that's something to be proud of. But he does have a magazine habit to feed, people. Also a baby.

Aphaeas was named player of the year. When asked for comments on the PCG red carpet (OK, dust texture carpet), fellow players said that they voted for her, "For looking after guild when all other officers were unavailable," "'Cos she's awesome," and because she "Stepped up to the mark and done well as a guild leader." Presumably that last comment came from Ray Winstone.

The best moment was, according to Aphaeas, when the guild received the Realm First Level 25 Guild award within Cataclysm. "The whole guild came together and worked really hard to be the first guild to be top level on our server, despite having our XP reset twice!" she said. "It really was a great achievement for the guild!"

Lifts are causing big problems for players at the moment, so they've been renamed 'Lift Bosses'. Bimble, Belimawr and Ulthane all picked up awards for 'Most deaths from the lift boss'. Their mums must be so proud.

Ancients: perennial photo-bombers of family snapshots.

Charlie Sheen wasn't invited.

"And now to invade Stormwind again."

NOW PLAYING

Minecraft
Server: 83.222.240.186
Port: 28265
Forum: bit.ly/pcgminecraftforum

The monumental handmade vistas of PCG's server were in danger of disappearing forever thanks to an update, but fortunately every single block of every single building has been copied across to the new server. A bit like Marble Arch in 1851, but without the huge physical effort. Enterprising Minecrafters have also built an illustrious Advent Calendar. Please send an email back in time so you can tell us what lies behind door number 25.

SW:TOR
Guild name: PC Gamer Mint Imperials, PCG The Revel Alliance
Apply: bit.ly/pcgrevelalliance, bit.ly/pcgmintimperials
Forum: bit.ly/oNaBqD

There's been a lot of demand for our *TOR* guilds, the PC Gamer Mint Imperials and PCG Revel Alliance. Use the links above to check out our profile pages on the official site and get in touch if you fancy a spot of lightsaber-swinging, Force-wielding, confectionery-punning action. Our comprehensive guide in PCG 235 will get you through to level 20 with ease.

Battlefield 3
Server: bit.ly/pcgbf3
Forum: bit.ly/pcgbf3forum

The shooter hasn't seen much action, partly thanks to *TOR*, *Skyrim* and *Minecraft* taking up all our time, and partly thanks to the six-player minimum and Battlelog's insistence on maximising the number-per-platoon to 100. Our servers are still there, though, and we need YOU, yes YOU, to join in and keep them going. Shooting men in the face is the perfect aperitif to smacking dragons in the face or lightsabering aliens in the face.

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It's more vital than ever to have a connection that can keep up.

PC gaming is changing. Digital distribution is fast becoming the preferred way for PC gamers to get hold of the latest releases. Whether you're buying Batman Arkham City from Steam or OnLive, one thing's certain. A fast, stable connection is more important than ever if you want to keep everything updated. It's not just the streets and characters of Gotham that will come fizzing through your internet cables, it's every patch and DLC pack that will follow along afterwards.

Of course, it's even more important for multiplayer games. Take Assassin's Creed Revelations. Its multiplayer mode is going to be bigger than ever, and you won't be able to hit the servers with an incompatible version of the game. If you want to spend your time stabbing your friends in the back, customising your assassin and learning more details about those marks you're hunting down in the singleplayer, a brilliant broadband connection is the only way to get back in to the fight faster.

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Need more convincing? Games are growing in size all the time, but that's not the only problem facing our internet pipes. More devices than ever are fighting for bandwith space. Whether it's other PCs downloading films and music, the console in the front room downloading the latest Xbox Live Arcade release, or a friend or family member downloading the latest version of Angry Birds on their iPad, there's more technology than ever fighting

Download Times

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5.6Gb	16.6m	100.9m

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WIN!

The winner of PC Gamer 233's 'Full Marx' competition

Step into the PC Gamer Politburo and you're greeted by yards of missives from the Central Committee. 'Same-day PC versions for everyone', demands one. '80% is still quite good', reminds another. As stirring as they are, we felt something was missing. That's why we put out the call in PCG 233: send us your finest PC Gamer propaganda to win a PC, courtesy of the makers of *Red Orchestra 2: Heroes of Stalingrad*. We wanted to laugh, to weep, to be roused to a patriotic fervour by your ingenuity.

Kris Donaldson's prototype for a high-tech radio tower, when activated, compelled us to type 'pcgmanifesto.info' into our browsers. Try it.

Then came Duncan Palmer, bestowing upon us a hand-crafted 'Order of the Mouse and Keyboard' medal. However, there are several of us and only one medal and the resultant scramble threatened the dignity of the Central Committee. Andrew Williamson, meanwhile, showed that if you draw a moustache on Tim, you get Josef Stalin with glasses. Whether or not your Tim is half Stalin or your Stalin is half Tim is the new measure of optimism in the Politburo.

WHAT FELIX WON...

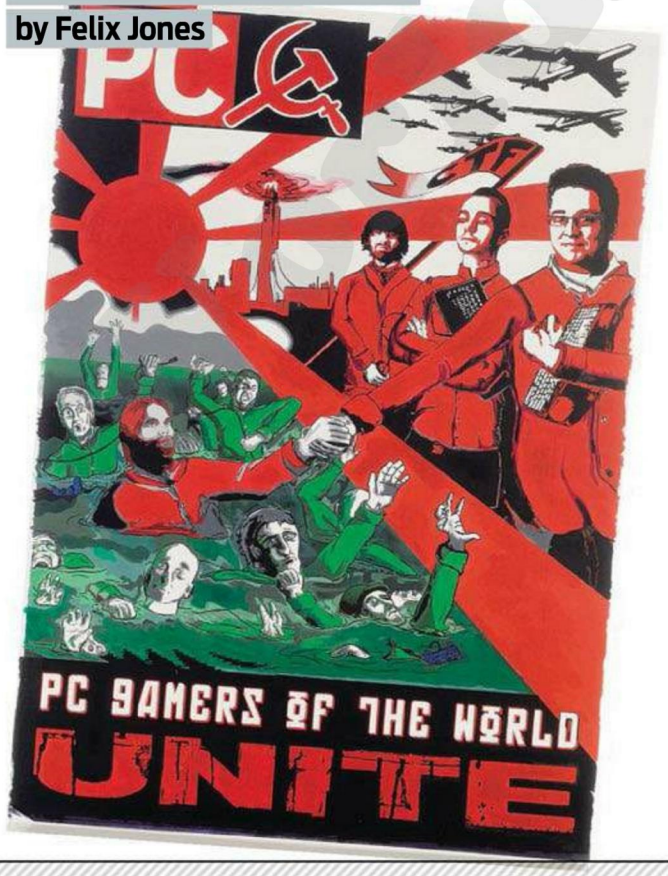
- GigaByte GA-Z68A-D3 motherboard
- 2x 2GB DDR3 1333MHz Kingston RAM
- HDD 1TB F3
- 24X DVD+-RW
- FC NZXT Sentry fan control
- VGA GTX 560 1GB graphics card
- CoolerMaster HAF 912 Case
- Asetek water cooling
- PSU Cyberpower 800W
- Intel Core i7 CPU 2600K overclocked to 4.5GHZ

Dan Brownley kept us guessing for weeks with his postcard campaign, which many in the Party believed to be the work of bourgeois Western PR stooges. Matt Minnitt, meanwhile is to be praised for his rendering of Minecraft-dude-as-proletarian-ideal, and we read Adam Kalewski's bloodstained journal with a mixture of appreciation and concern. Cresting the pile, however, strides Felix Jones. His painting depicting the day he 'was saved from the mire of console gaming' shook us all with its emotional honesty, attention to detail, and impressive thickness. For his services to the PC Gamer Politburo, Felix wins the PC and need no longer work in a salt mine.

The winning entry

'Saved from the mire'

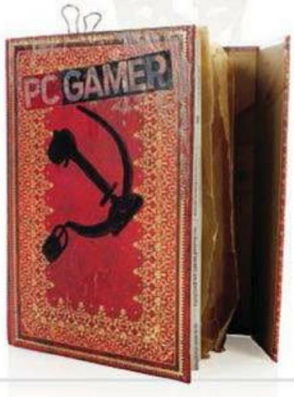
by Felix Jones



Glorious runners-up

1

2



3

1. **Duncan Palmer** *'Order of the Mouse and Keyboard' medal*
2. **Kris Donaldson** *Radio Tower*
3. **Adam Kalewski** *Journal*

Now win this...

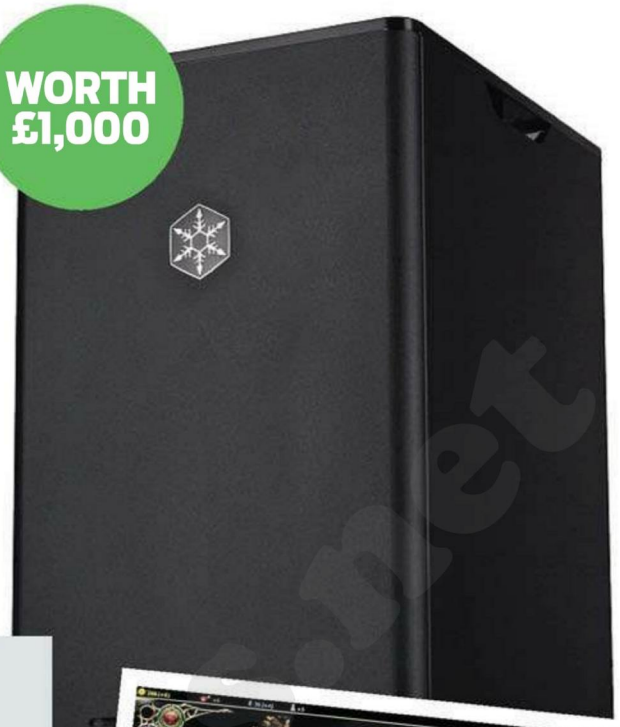
A spell-flinging PC

Warlock: Master of the Arcane places you in the pointy shoes and flowing robes of a magic-hurling leader of men. It's a civilisation-building turn-based strategy game where your regular forces of warriors, bowmen and warships are bolstered with elves, lizardmen and dragons. You can also take an active role in combat, using spells to heal your troops and fry your foes.

You can hunt down monster lairs to earn rewards and expand your territory, lay siege to rival towns and forge diplomatic alliances. There's also naval combat, both between civilisations and against enormous monsters of the deep, such as sea serpents and giant octopuses. It's set in the same world as fantasy RTS series *Majesty*, so expect to cross paths with plenty of creatures as you contend to claim the title of Warlock. You can read all about *Warlock: Master of the Arcane* on page 38. It sounds quite good, actually.

Why not kit out your wizard's tower with a cutting-edge gaming PC? Paradox Interactive have put together a top-notch rig for the winner of this month's competition. All you need to do to enter is follow the instructions below. The winner will also receive a code to unlock all of Paradox's games on Steam – that's more than a hundred games and expansions, valued at over £500. What a wizard prize. You'll want to enter below.

WORTH £1,000



THE PRIZE

- Lan Party Evo Commander
- Silverstone Fortress FT03B
- Intel Core i5 2500K
- GTX 560Ti 1GB
- MS Windows 7 Home Premium 64 bit
- 8GB 1600MHZ RAM
- Asus Maximus IV Gene-z
- 2TB SATA II HDD
- 32GB SSD in SRT Mode
- PLUS a code for every single one of Paradox's games on Steam.

HOW TO WIN

Legendary loot

We want you to channel arcane forces into a magical artefact of your own design. Either send it to us directly, or make a video demonstrating its uncanny properties at work. Nothing heavy, flammable or prone to decay, so your +2 Horse Carcass of Gasoline can stay in the garage. Best one wins the PC.

COMPETITION RULES By taking part in a Competition, you agree to be bound by the Competition Rules which are summarised below but can be viewed in full at www.futurenet.com/futureonline/competitionrules.asp. Late or incomplete entries will be disqualified. Proof of posting (if relevant) shall not be deemed proof of delivery. Entries must be submitted by an individual (not via any agency or similar) and, unless otherwise stated, are limited to one per household. The Company reserves the right in its sole discretion to substitute any prize with cash or a prize of comparable value. Unless otherwise stated, the Competition is open to all GB residents of 18 years and over, except employees of Future Publishing and any party involved in the competition or their households. By entering a Competition you give permission to use your name, likeness and personal information in connection with the Competition and for promotional purposes. All entries will become the property of the Company upon receipt and will not be returned. You warrant that the Competition entry is entirely your own work and not copied or adapted from any other source. If you are a winner, you may have to provide additional information. Details of winners will be available on request within three months of the closing date. If you are a winner, receipt by you of any prize is conditional upon you complying with (amongst other things) the Competition Rules. You acknowledge and agree that neither the Company nor any associated third parties shall have any liability to you in connection with your use and/or possession of your prize.

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Name

Address

Postcode

Email

Phone Number

Send your competition entry and this form to: **The 'Artefact or fiction' competition, PC Gamer, 30 Monmouth St, Bath BA1 2BW.** The closing date for this competition is February 15, 2012.

Your contact details from this entry form will only be used for contacting you if you are a winner. For terms and conditions applying to PC Gamer competitions, point your eyes at the small print leftwards.

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REVIEWS

How we review

Wherever possible, we finish every game before finalising the review. We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of the reviews section is to help you make buying decisions. As such, we'll review paid-for content of all types in addition to the latest big-name releases.

Our scoring system explained

0-30% Intolerable
A crime against gaming. Whether it's bugs or bad design, this should be shot on sight.

31-45% Weak
Serious flaws ruin any chance this game has of offering sustained fun.

46-60% Mediocre
A very ordinary game, quickly forgotten. Think twice even if you find it cheap.

61-75% Fair
A decent effort that, but for a little more polish, coulda been a contender.

76-89% Good
Enjoyable, well-made and entertaining – just falling short of true greatness.

90%+ Editor's Choice
Oozing class, this is the work of experts at the top of their game. Bravo, sirs!

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE ★★★★★

A game scoring 90% or more is the proud recipient of a PC Gamer Editor's Choice award. The Editor's personal seal of approval means we think the recipient is a truly great example of its genre.

THE PC GAMER MACHINES

We aim to review games at their best, and this means playing them on our two Cyberpower PCs. The Gamer Infinity I7 Pro boasts a Core I7 920 CPU, 3Gb DDR3 RAM and a GTS250 graphics card. Coming from the AMD angle, our watercooled Gamer Ultra Perseus machine has a Phenom II CPU, 4Gb DDR3 RAM and an HD 4870 card. Powerful machines, both, but we also test new games on lower-spec machines, and we'll tell you if a game will make unreasonable demands. Go to *www.cyberpowersystem.co.uk* for more info on our top-spec machines.

CYBERPOWER

Forceful

It was a long, long time ago when BioWare announced they were working on an MMO. Six years later, the results have finally come to fruition. *The Old Republic* is already one of the world's biggest and slickest games, confident and *largely* bug-free on launch. As an inveterate Star Wars nerd, I'd be interested in it even if the game was rubbish, but *TOR*'s focus on story and character has given it everything I was missing in an MMO. Namely, the chance to order a tiny Jawa around and force him to make lightsabers.

I've found myself roleplaying my Sith Inquisitor in real life. I put my hood up at the slightest hint of drizzle, make evil noises every time someone stubs their toe, and threaten Owen constantly with force lightning. As Palpatine would say, it's good, *good*.

RICHARD MCCORMICK
NEWS EDITOR
Richard.McCormick@futurenet.com

Let us know what you think
Get in touch via our 'Send' section on page 68 or via our forum at *www.pcgamer.com/forum*.

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Need to know

What is it?
A story-based MMORPG set in the Star Wars universe.

Influenced by
Knights of the Old Republic, *World of Warcraft*

Play it on
3GHz dual-core CPU, 4GB RAM, GeForce GTX 280/ Radeon HD 4870

Alternatively
DC Universe Online, 88%

Copy protection
Subscription

"Plenty of gamers will be more than happy to trade their bows and arrows for blaster rifles"

A NEW HOPE

You'll laugh, you'll cry. **STAR WARS: THE OLD REPUBLIC** is a deep, complex world you want to live in. ***By Josh Augustine***

Thirty minutes had passed since my insectoid ally had asked me the question. It was a simple one – did I intend to resist his claim to this land? – but complicated by the previous eight hours of politics, betrayal, espionage and war. I didn't know what to do.

After consulting five different people on the subject, including my wife over the phone, I reluctantly made my choice on the familiar BioWare dialogue wheel and betrayed my always-faithful insectoid allies in order to defend a man who'd just slain his own wife to prove his loyalty. I felt used.

I immediately wanted to load a quicksave and reverse my decision, but I couldn't. Unlike BioWare's library of other RPGs, *The Old Republic* is an MMO. Everything you do here is permanent, with unavoidable consequences. An abandoned friend suffers his ineluctable fate; a rescued child remains grateful and secure. It's an unexpected tool that BioWare use to leverage player emotion and create some of the most engaging, moving story moments I've ever played in an RPG. Moments light-years beyond what we've seen in MMOs so far.

Far, far away

The *TOR* universe is beautiful. All 17 of the game's worlds are brought to life with evocative architecture, meticulous set design, and a convincing population. Many quest hubs are the size of small cities, with over a hundred soldiers, merchants, doctors, civilians and the rest going about their business inside. While most of these tertiary characters stay in a single location (we aren't talking *Skyrim* here), they're almost always acting out a scene – a Jawa trying to protect his droids from Imperial harassers at a starport, soldiers training with a drill sergeant, or a woman receiving saddening news from a friend. They make destinations feel like places with both a deep past and a future. You will see some repetition of environmental models and building layouts, but the developers have wisely kept it to a minimum.

TOR is a BioWare RPG through and through, so you'll be performing the standard BioWare RPG activities: gathering a crew, meeting interesting people, making moral choices, killing stuff and upgrading your gear. Combat relies on the traditional trinity setup, so you can choose to focus on healing, tanking or damage dealing as one of the eight advanced classes available to each faction. A few class designs do break the mold a little, such as the ranged and stealth tanks, but most fall in line with traditional archetypes. The pool of playable species, however, is minuscule – you'll be disappointed if you were dead-set on playing a freaky-looking alien.

I like the graphics style – very reminiscent of the *Knights of the Old Republic* series – though the lighthearted look won't be to everyone's tastes. I think BioWare's bet was a sound one, and there will be plenty of gamers more than happy to trade in their bows and arrows for blaster rifles.

The science fiction setting is put to terrific use in the game's consistently dazzling animations and spell effects. The traditional gold sparkles of fantasy-game healing spells are replaced by my Agent's floating probes that fall down and rotate around my target, spraying him or her with healing kolto fluid. Detonating grenades send enemies sprawling over railings. When I stab an enemy with an electrified dagger, it actually sticks in their chest as their body helplessly convulses and crackles with electricity. And, of course, every blaster blast and saber swing is enhanced with the familiar sound effects and music that the official licence grants to *TOR*.

Not so fresh are the game's quest mechanics, which are rudimentary and mostly drawn from the oldest tricks in the book: kill X, use Y, or talk to Z. In my 85 hours spent on launch servers, I didn't encounter a single vehicle or transformation mechanic that mixed up the abilities I had at my disposal. A few riddle dialogue quests popped up, but nothing revolutionary. That said, the novel Bonus Objective system, which usually makes the 'kill X' portions of questing optional, does a fine job of breaking out grinding and making it a separate choice. It lets those who don't care to commit ▸

Classy vehicles

Second-hand deals

Bounty Hunter
Lots of storage room for your flash-frozen pals.

Sith Inquisitor
One proto-TIE interceptor, slightly squashed.

Smuggler
Millennium Falcon? Never heard of it.

Jedi trials

A knight's first ten levels mapped

Fresher's week
Whack Flesh Raiders on Tython until they release your fellow students from wooden cages.

Ethics
Consider if helping a Flesh Raider learn to move stuff with his mind is a good idea. Do it anyway.

Spelunking
Kill a load of dark Jedi in a cave with a friend as part of a heroic dungeon. Why do dark Jedi love caves so much?

LEVEL 1 | LEVEL 2 | LEVEL 3 | LEVEL 4 | LEVEL 5 | LEVEL 6 | LEVEL 7 | LEVEL 8 | LEVEL 9 | LEVEL 10

Good question
Wonder why fully grown Jedi students can't get out of wooden cages on their own.

Sexytime
Break up the forbidden love of two young Jedi. Then sleep with a cute Twi'lek.

Sshhmmmmm
Make your own lightsaber, and finally get to turn it on. It makes the noise! Leave Tython at last.

genocide on a regular basis stay focused on the story content, which is told through consistently entertaining cutscenes and enlivened with the memorable, nuanced characters we've come to expect from BioWare. Almost everything in *TOR* is voiced, and the voiceover work is, with rare exceptions, top notch. Subtle touches, such as my Agent slipping in and out of accents while working undercover, or the slightly quavering tone of a psychotic doctor, entertain.

What's more, you can actually provide permanent help to these people, unlike in most MMOs, thanks to *TOR*'s story areas. These seamless sections of the world are instanced for you and your group on the fly (no load screens or delays), enabling everything inside to react, change, and/or explode in response to the choices you make. We've seen similar technology used in *World of Warcraft* and a few other MMOs to progressively alter an environment down a linear path that all players share, but BioWare use it to tailor the world for your character and his or her personal story. That single change is revolutionary: your choices matter, and will affect the world you and your friends play in forever.

"Your choices will affect the world you and your friends play in forever"

My biggest concern going into *TOR* was that the focus on storytelling would restrict our ability to play with friends and guildmates, but I was overjoyed (and, frankly, quite surprised) to find that it wasn't a problem at all.

I played on-and-off with my aide-de-camp, Gavin, during the first 35 levels of our characters, and we never once had a problem finding content to tackle together or joining each other on our class quests. The mind-blowing ability to holo-call into your groupmates' conversations from anywhere on the planet (you show up as a translucent projection of your character) is liberating, allowing you to adventure with your friends without having to stumble about like conjoined twins.

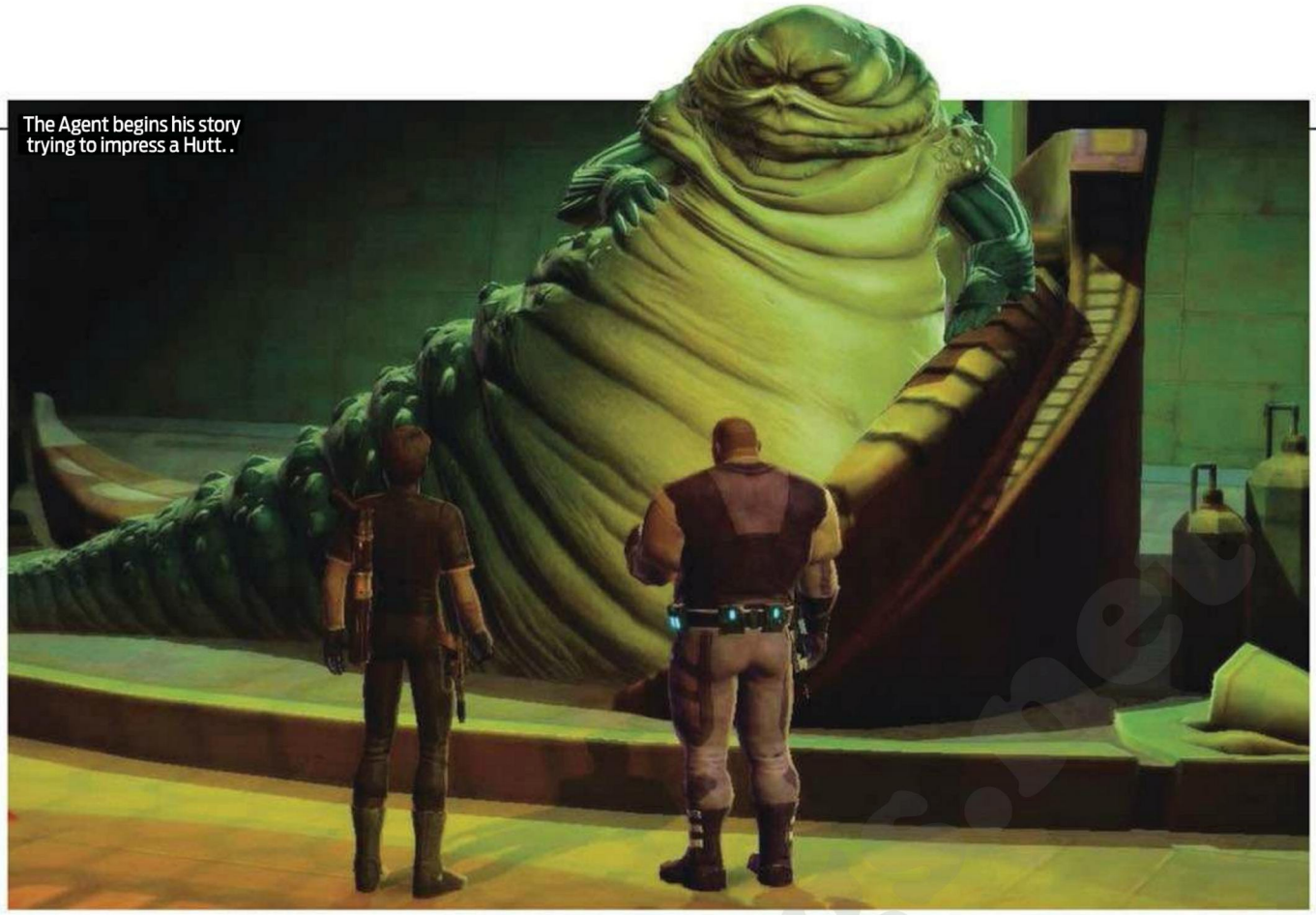
But even though I could quest with Gavin, I wasn't sure I'd *want* to. Making moral choices by committee can be tricky for control freaks like me. When a multiplayer conversation option pops up, everyone in your group gets to select the choice they want. Then a hidden dice roll determines who actually gets to respond. The first time Gavin's evil Sith butchered someone who was begging for mercy, I was outraged. How could he? I felt invested in and protective of my softy Sith Agent and his trajectory, and Gavin had ruined my story.

Go away, Gavin

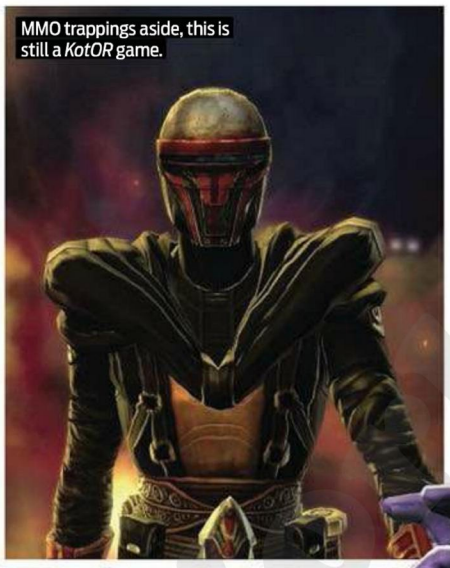
But, on second, calmer thoughts, I realised I was actually playing a different story: the story of an unlikely group working together to defeat a common enemy. It's a very Star Wars theme, and, much like the inability to load quicksaves, adds a depth and dimension to the roleplaying. There's a similar difference between playing Dungeons & Dragons by yourself and with a group of friends. Sure, another player will inevitably piss you off by randomly grabbing an NPC and hurling them into a fire, but that's part of the spontaneity that makes roleplaying in a group so much fun. It's an awesome, unscripted RPG experience that you can only have in *The Old Republic* right now.

Spurred on by the unexpected narrative I was experiencing with Gavin, I decided to try grouping with random players. Heroic quests are exactly what commitment-shy gamers like myself need to get grouping: open-world story areas along your questing route with tough enemies that two to four players can knock out in 15 minutes. They're prevalent on every planet, very casual and non-threatening. They're the MMO equivalent of asking someone to join you and your buddies for drinks after work. *Hey there, wanna come hack a few droid terminals with us?* In the end I grouped up while levelling more often in *The Old Republic* than I have in any other MMO I've ever played – by a very large margin – but it was always by choice.

Groups looking for a challenge with more bite have Flashpoints, *TOR*'s four-person instanced dungeons. Their difficulty ramps up as you level, and high-level Flashpoints have complicated fights that are very challenging, even for coordinated groups. Thankfully, the penalty for death throughout *TOR* is next to nothing: players can self-



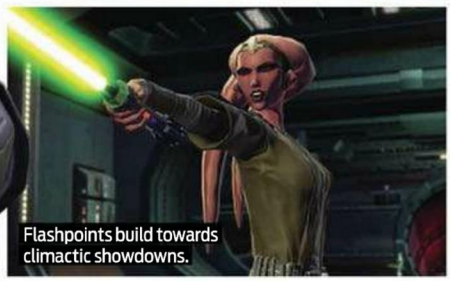
The Agent begins his story trying to impress a Hutt..



MMO trappings aside, this is still a *KotOR* game.

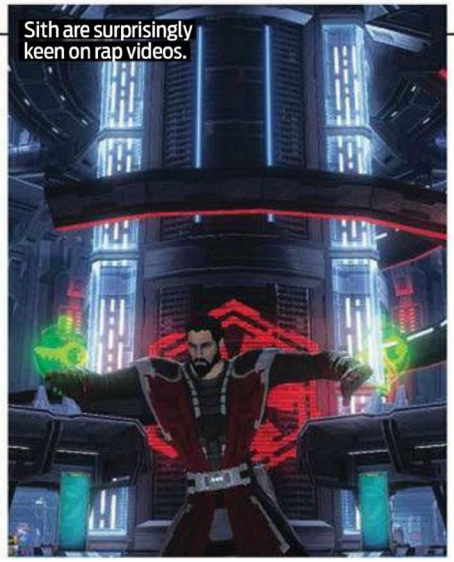
Fast-travel vehicles are appropriate to the planet you're on.

"UNLIMITED COSMIC POWER!" Wait, no - that's Jafar.



Flashpoints build towards climactic showdowns.

Plenty of claasic Star Wars races make cameos.



Sith are surprisingly keen on rap videos.

This is not the oesophagus you're looking for.

Space combat is a linear single-player minigame.

Seeing your character in cutscenes is a real pleasure.

Take your time with character creation.

An early speed-boost ability shortens travel times.

resurrect wherever they died with no corpse run, and get ten seconds of unbreakable stealth in which to run away from whatever killed them.

The only major hindrance to teamwork is the very noticeable lack of a looking-for-group tool. A very limited attempt can be found in the social menu, but it's so worthless that it's borderline insulting.

Your story

In MMOs, we usually travel around the world playing through the stories of other people. Quests revolve around the problems and desires of the quest-givers, because our characters don't have any – other than the insatiable desire for experience points and loot. But in *The Old Republic* your character has a story and all your adventures revolve around it: you go places because you have business to take care of there. It may seem like a modest difference, but being the centre of the universe in a personalised, branching narrative weaves a strong sense of meaning and purpose into everything you do in the game.

I created my Imperial Agent to be a champion of the people – someone who signed up for military duty to protect the innocent of the Empire from enemy attacks. And it worked well, for a while. I picked all the obvious light-side options. I used cool technology such as spinal-implanted holoprojectors to disguise myself as a service droid and infiltrate terrorist cells to save lives. But as the story went on, I began to discover that the world of an Imperial Agent is not so black-and-white. My enemies were constantly changing, and they weren't always the people I assumed them to be.

Without spoiling the details, I'll just say that I was very impressed by the overarching story *TOR* empowered me to create: one of a naïve agent trying to do the right thing in an Empire filled with both evil and noble people. Around level 15, I even turned down a perfectly good quest because I thought my character would have refused it – an MMO first for me. My character had gotten sick of being told to exterminate the native populations every time he arrived on a planet, and he started to wonder if he was the bad guy. The story evolved almost perfectly with my own narrative – it was on that same planet that BioWare tested my resolve by putting me in the situation described at the start of this review: the same native population that I'd championed now demanded the blood of a betrayed man trying to redeem his family.

A few people are going to want a say in what you do in that big story of yours. Namely, the members of the crew that you assemble while playing. *TOR*'s companion system lets you have one crew member out fighting with you at any time, and all of them can be customised with new gear and appearance options. This may not be new for BioWare singleplayer RPGs, but it's one of the most innovative and successful elements of *The Old Republic* as an MMO, providing you with an ever-present audience that reacts to and reflects your choices, via dialogue and affection/romance options.

Each class recruits different companions, each with their own unique quirk and backstory. As a level 35 Imperial Agent, I've gathered a violent anarchist, a grovelling robot, a diplomat who's merged with the hive mind of an insectoid species, and a doctor who can transform himself into a space werewolf at will.

Crew skills are the game's crafting system, and provide the usual activities: gather materials and use them to build weapons, armour and consumables – with a few added twists. Gathering professions also allow you to send companions on missions, which removes access to that companion for 5-20 minutes and gives them a chance to return with crafting materials, credits, light-side and dark points, new recipes and skill points. It's a decent system for people who don't want to spend the time gathering and crafting themselves, but it can get fairly annoying to have to continually send companions on new missions every few minutes – there should be an option to automate this.

It wasn't until I discovered that you could reverse-engineer items in *TOR* to discover new recipes that I began to really get drawn into the crafting system. Suddenly, there was a whole complement of unlisted recipes out there for me to work toward. It's a rarely-used concept that has been expertly implemented to give crafters another way to hone in on the specific areas they want to specialise in.

Another pleasant surprise I unearthed while item-tinkering was moddable gear: select weapons and armour the stats of which are determined by the modification items dropped into them. Once you find moddable gear with a look you like (or a helmet that changes your voice in a cool way), you can conceivably keep it forever, tossing in new modifications to boost the stats as you level up.

It's a great system that helps you establish a unique look in the universe, and its interface is very well designed. The only problem I had was trying to figure out which stats were best for my character. Ambiguously named stats such as Surge aren't explained, and I had to go digging through submenus in my character pane to even get a hint at what they offered me.

TOR is full of clever new approaches and tweaks to long-standing MMO features. The auction house automatically suggests buyout prices to undercut the lowest seller; datacrons are nestled on every planet, offering small permanent stat boosts, and there's a full codex stuffed with lore, backstories, and interesting info for the knowledge-seeker. The only major disappointment on this front were the achievements, which appear as tiny, uninspired codex entries – clearly a hastily-built afterthought.

Shooting up

Where *The Old Republic* makes the flimsiest attempt to break the mold is in its combat model: a very traditional click-to-activate ability system that borrows heavily from the big MMOs of recent years. It's enjoyable enough to play with, and has a few nuances, but will ultimately leave MMO vets with a sense of déjà vu at a time when most are eagerly looking for something different.

The 16 advanced classes do, however, offer a pleasing breadth of playstyles, ranging from ruthless Sith to tricky Smugglers, and most can fulfil two roles in groups, depending on the skill tree you choose to specialise in. The skill trees are very different from one another, but there's almost zero room for customisation within each tree, so don't expect to be able to experiment much after you've settled on one.

Around level 15, you gain command of your own starship, which matches the style of your class, ▸

"I began to discover that the world was not so black and white"

and you're free to cruise around the galaxy. You can march imperiously around your ship like you can in *Mass Effect*, but alas, this time your ship is tiny and there are only a few interactive spots.

Your ship can see action in any of the dozen or so space combat missions drizzled around the galaxy map. In each, your ship proceeds along a fixed path as you use your mouse to target enemy fighters and battlements on enemy capital ships, and each takes a few minutes to complete. Ship combat is a pleasant diversion that breaks up your questing routine, but it's definitely not why I'd recommend *TOR*.

That's cheating

Likewise, I'm lukewarm about the player-vs-player elements at low-to-mid levels. I've played the three instanced PvP WarZones 20 times, and most matches had a very broad range of players (anywhere between levels 12 and 50). Almost without exception, the highest level players – who have the most skills and skill points at their disposal – dominated the match. The measures put in place to balance incongruous player power are more effective at higher levels, but player-vs-player is painful to play early on.

These annoying balance issues will hopefully be alleviated at level 50, or if BioWare decide to implement cross-server signups to allow for tighter level restrictions. The WarZones do house some fun distractions – especially Huttball, a twisted version of football with additional flame pits, acid pools and death – and it'd be a shame if you had to avoid them until max level to find a fair fight.

The game's designated open-world Player vs Player zones look extremely promising. Particularly the endgame planet Ilum, whose expansive, intricate battlefield filled with battling war machines and giant turrets is entertaining even without other players in it. They're currently ghost towns as players focus on levelling, but I do hope that these zones live up to their potential to serve as bloody hangouts for PvP enthusiasts like myself.

BioWare score extra points for server stability. I didn't hear of a single server crash in the entire first week, and the constant addition of new servers kept queue times reasonable. Inside the game, things were a bit creakier. My client never crashed, but the typical MMO bugs showed up to cause problems, such as a few broken quests, unusable gathering nodes, and user interface glitches. I only saw reports of one game-breaking bug, but that was fixed on launch day.

For the record, this review is based on my impressions from my first 85 hours in the game, playing as an Imperial Agent who reached level 35. Inevitably, a lot of questions remain, particularly regarding the endgame, elements of which weren't ready to be evaluated at the time. As always, we'll follow-up this review with constant and regular updates of our impressions as the game progresses in both the magazine and at PCGamer.com. For now, we know that hard-mode Flashpoints, raids and Player vs Player areas await us at max level, but we don't know if they'll prove diverse and interesting enough to keep our attention for the long-term.

If the endgame consists of gear-grinding and standard raid encounters, it'll have a very jarring effect on those of us who loved playing through stories for the previous 200 hours. I'm also concerned that the need to record new voiceovers for every bit of new dialogue will slow down production of content updates, and make the team more likely to focus only on raid content post-launch.

Into the future

But that's all speculation for now. What I know for certain is that it takes close to 200 hours to level a character to 50, and there are eight different class stories that I intend to play through. There's a ridiculous amount of game in *The Old Republic*. It's consistently outstanding and, if you enjoy RPGs at all, the price tag is easily justified – even if you never step foot past max-level.

The Old Republic plunges players into the Star Wars universe we've always wanted to live in, and succeeds as both an RPG and an MMO. And perhaps just as thrilling, there's an oversized Bantha's worth of potential in expanding such areas as space combat and the companion system, or in adding such new features as guild housing. This MMO has got a long, bright future ahead of it. ■

"It's the Star Wars universe we've always wanted to live in"

◆ **Expect to pay** $60 plus $15/month subscription ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** EA ◆ **Developer** BioWare ◆ **Multiplayer** Massively ◆ **Link** www.swtor.com

VERDICT

An achievement as an RPG and an MMO, *The Old Republic* offers something bold and new for gamers. Don't miss out.

PC GAMER **93**

Sith are surprisingly big on personal grooming.

The Jedi homeworld is quite nice really.

Taking cover unlocks special abilities for Smugglers.

Impressive-looking abilities are earned very early on.

TOMORROW'S WORLD

In **ANNO 2070** the best way to predict the future is to build it yourself. ***By Chris Thursten***

Need to know

What is it?
City-building real-time strategy with an innovative online component.

Influenced by
Anno 1404, *SimCity*

Play it on
2GHz CPU, 2GB RAM, 512MB DX9 graphics card

Alternatively
Cities XL, 75%

Copy protection
CD key tied to Ubisoft account

Of all the things to bring a civilisation to a grinding halt, it'd have to be truffles. My fisheries, oil refineries, pig farms and distilleries operate with total efficiency. My surplus goods are loaded into cargo haulers and sold at a premium to the hippies across the waves. Yet I can grow no further. If I want to expand to the rest of my island home, I need to meet a sudden and unexpected demand for lobster dinners.

Anno 2070 is a real-time management sim that tasks you with creating the biggest and happiest empire you can in a future where resources are scarce as a result of climate change. It's a shift from the historical foundations of the previous games in the series in favour of something socially-minded and forward-looking.

The core mechanics are the same as previous games. If I'm going to solve my lobster problem, I'll need to establish a second settlement on a whole new island, and establish the shipping routes to bring that lobster across the ocean. The difference is that your rival territories aren't Belgian settlers, but islands exploited by independent contractors. The population is split between smog-and-profit megacorp Global Trust and the environmentalist Eden Initiative, with scientists providing technology to both. "Wait a second," you might say. "Isn't this world visibly displaying the impact of heavy industry? Why would you choose to be an industrialist?"

It's a fair question. *Anno 2070* squanders the topicality of its subject matter with factions that are cartoonishly good and evil. Eden Initiative workers are soft-spoken and demand only tea, vegetables and a concert hall. Global Trust, meanwhile, fill their workers with booze, fast food, casinos and aspirational TV programmes. It's Eco-Jesus going up against Scrooge McDuck in Ayn Rand cosplay.

You'll work for both factions in singleplayer, making choices about which to support. I found myself going with Global Trust to see what hilarious mishaps their terrible decision-making would inflict on the world next - which, if nothing else, added a little life to an otherwise drab campaign.

You're lead by the hand almost all of the way, as the game (very slowly) imparts the techniques you'll need to succeed. There's a story, but it's a bit of a non-starter and *Anno 2070*'s voice-acting can't carry it.

The single mission and free play modes are much more successful. At its heart, *Anno 2070* is a game of creative engineering: building a big, interconnected machine that looks like a city but purrs like an engine. You're free to problem-solve as you see fit, answering demand for resources with trade, research and expansion. You're also constantly being given additional objectives ranging, such as headhunting a certain number of employees.

Should competition demand it, there's also combat: mostly naval, with aircraft and base defences for spice. It's far from the main event, but the need for military protection adds an additional dimension.

Playable and polished, *Anno 2070* is a steady improvement on what has come before. If anything, it plays things too safe, with innovations like online elections and undersea bases making little impact. Worth your time, but lacking the resources to become a management great. ■

"It's Eco-Jesus vs Scrooge McDuck in Ayn Rand cosplay"

Rampant consumerism

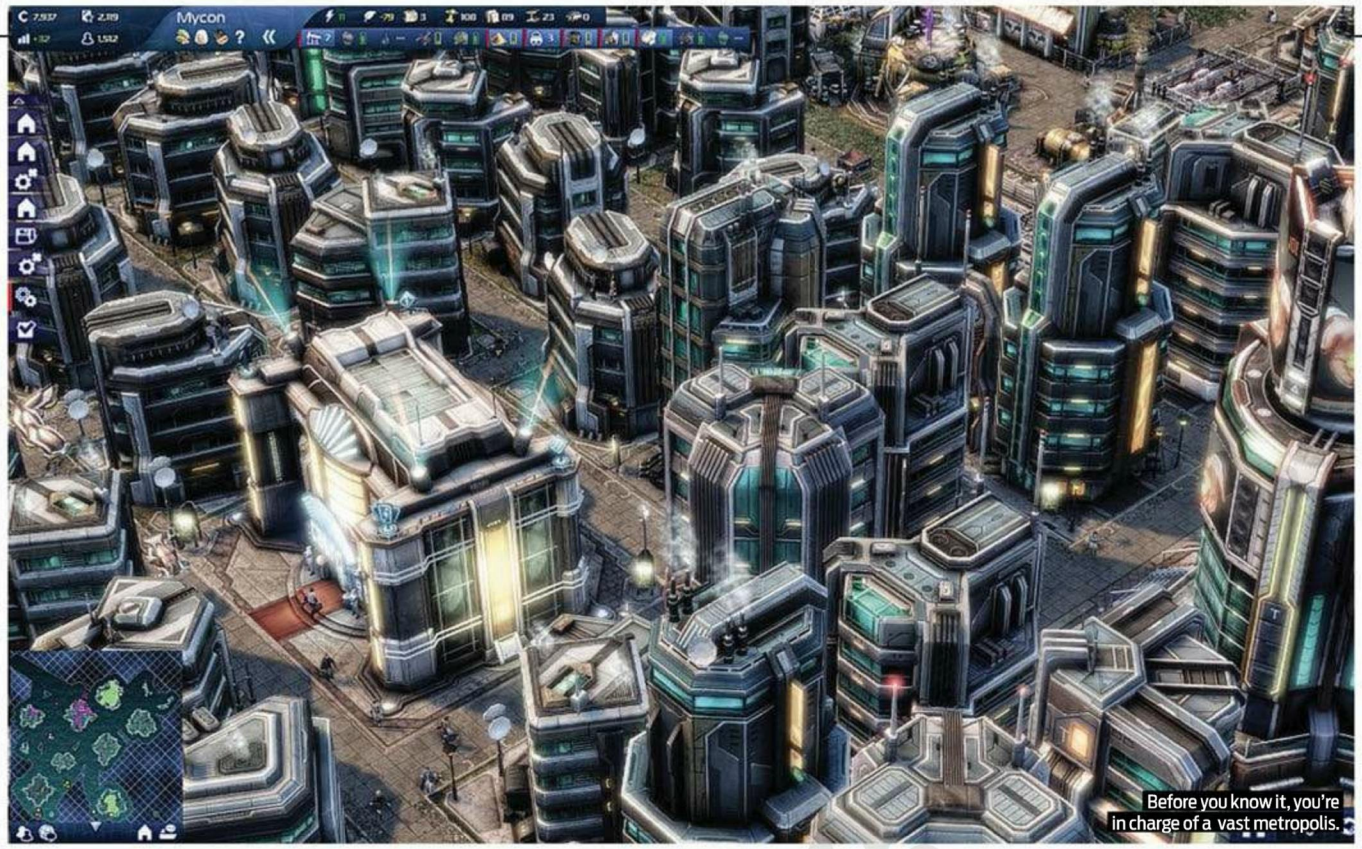
The goods that'll keep your workers happy

◆ **Expect to pay** £34.99 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Ubisoft ◆ **Developer** Blue Byte, Related Designs ◆ **Multiplayer** Yes ◆ **Link** anno.uk.ubi.com/pc

VERDICT

Anno 2070 is a polished management sim with some innovative ideas, but it doesn't push them far enough.

PC GAMER **75**



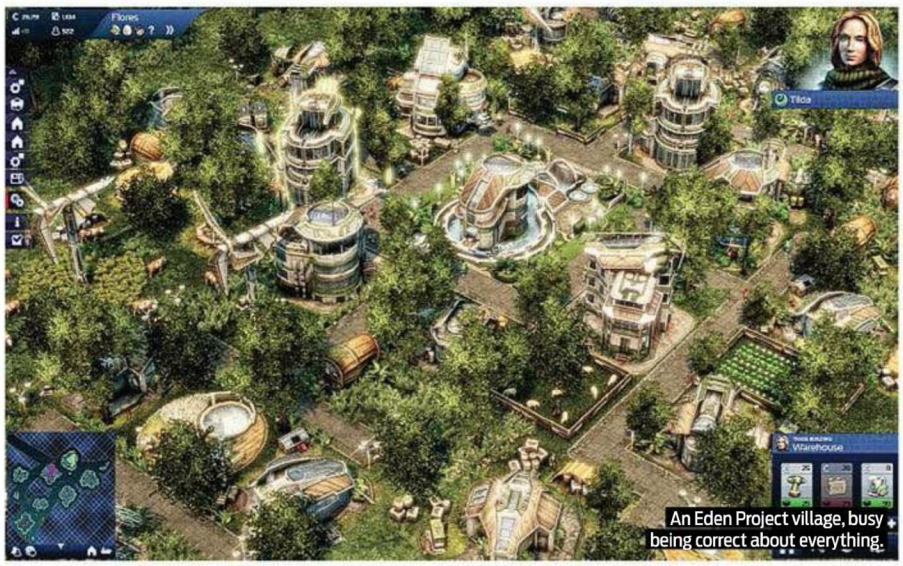
Before you know it, you're in charge of a vast metropolis.

Deep-sea bases give access to unique resources.

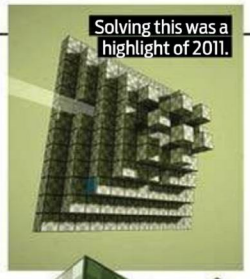
Establish trade routes to fill resource gaps.

The future is metallic blue, apparently.

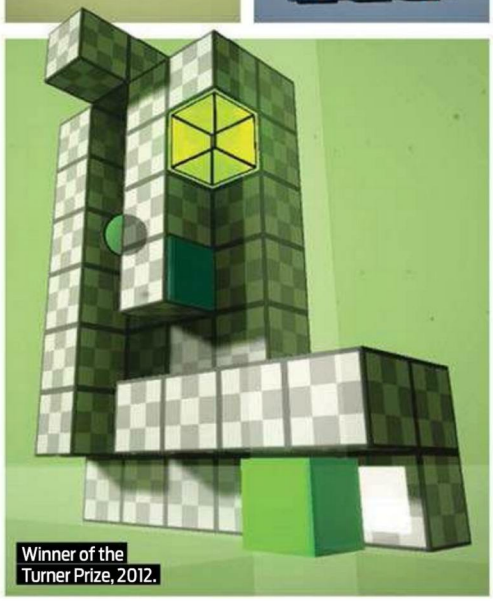
Roaming merchants sell building materials and more.

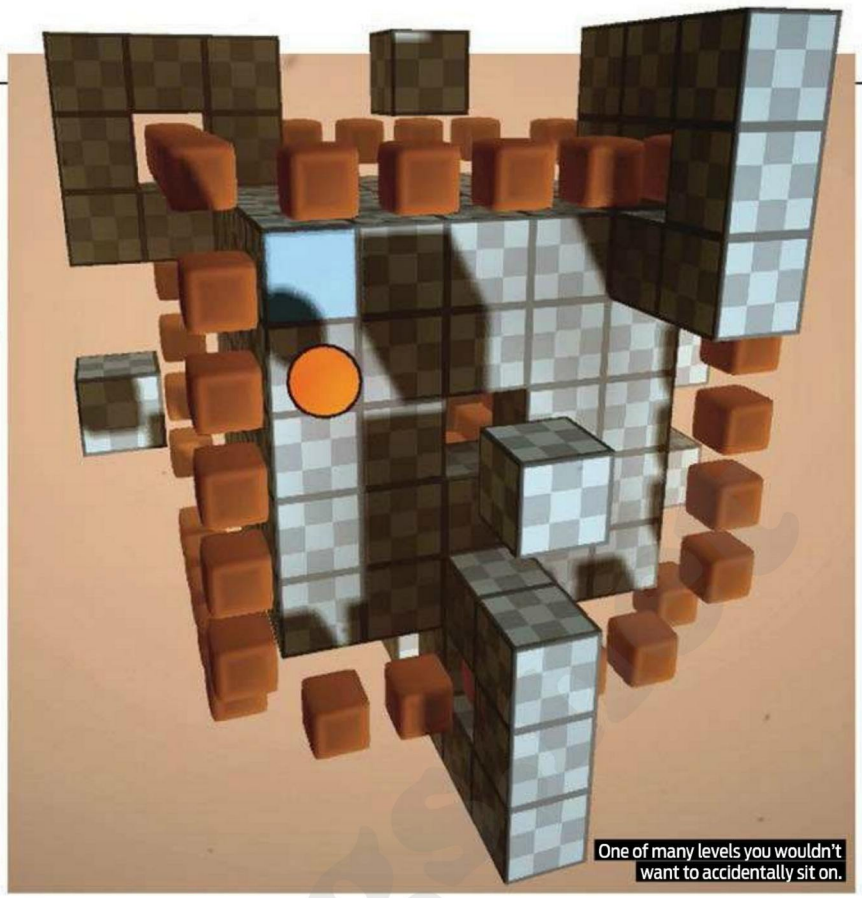


An Eden Project village, busy being correct about everything.


Solving this was a highlight of 2011.

This one isn't going so well.


Winner of the Turner Prize, 2012.


One of many levels you wouldn't want to accidentally sit on.

MARBLE RADNESS

Geometry and physics receive an elegant remix in **ENGLISH COUNTRY TUNE**. *By Chris Donlan*

Need to know

What is it?
An abstract puzzle game that likes to muddle its own rules.

Influenced by
Marble Madness, Portal

Play it on
Any PC

Alternatively
Puzzle Dimension, 82%

Copy protection
Steam

There are times when *English Country Tune* feels like an entrance exam for MIT or Google, or a particularly self-important branch of Morrisons. I stare at the screen, and realise I have no idea what to do, let alone how I'm meant to do it. It's a game that isn't afraid to make you feel stupid.

You're a square of blue card travelling end over end across a series of blocky arenas, pushing objects around and getting into abstract scrapes. You can climb walls, and you can crawl down the back of a level and out the other side. The twist is that traversal is just the starting point for a game that rewrites its rules and objectives with each new batch of challenges you unlock.

While you're pushing blocks off ledges in Whale, you're leaving cubes in your wake in Planting, as your mission switches from sweeping up to covering every surface of a three-dimensional object without getting trapped.

It can make you feel giddy with joy when everything suddenly makes sense. Its challenges haunt you through the day, while its solutions come to you in the night, and you wake up happy. I'd forgotten that puzzles could work that way.

My favourite section is Advanced Cutting, in which you move over a series of spikes – each one punching a hole in your card so that you can match the template you need to unlock the exit. It's reverse-engineering at its most tactile; it's there, and then it's gone, and you're on to something completely different.

Advanced Cutting is one of the simpler ideas, however. A lot of the things that you're asked to do in *English Country Tune* exist in a terrifying realm of pure geometry, where spatial awareness is confounded by bizarre physics. In Larva, for example, you're tasked with prodding a series of spheres into ditches. Except the spheres borrow their understanding of gravity from the direction you push them in, meaning they may simply edge along the floor if you shove from behind, but they'll fall sideways off the screen if you shove from the side. There's an undo option, thankfully, letting you cancel your moves one by one, unstitching a series of increasingly catastrophic mistakes and detangling the mess of thought processes twizzled together in your brain. It's a blunt approach to handling difficulty, but it encourages you to learn while you fumble along.

And learning ultimately lies at the heart of *English Country Tune*. That shouldn't be too surprising: it's the work of indie developer Stephen Lavelle, a man who once wondered what *Tetris* would be like if you had to play it backwards, and then built a version that worked that way in order to find out. He's the sort of guy we need more of, in other words, and *English Country Tune* is the sort of puzzler we need more of, too. It's precise and devious. It's infuriating and endlessly open-minded. ■

◆ **Expect to pay** £7 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Stephen Lavelle ◆ **Developer** In-house
◆ **Multiplayer** None ◆ **Link** www.englishcountrytune.com

VERDICT

Stylish and obscure, this is a fascinating exploration of abstract puzzle design. No idea where the name comes from, though.

PC GAMER **85**

BURNT OUT

IGNITE is an enjoyable racer ruined by an unnecessary gimmick. ***By Phil Savage***

Racers lose points for crashing into walls. Help them do this.

Richard Branson's basket provided a moderately better view of the track.

Flying in the face of both convention and common sense, races in *Ignite* aren't won by coming first. Oh no. Instead you build points by drifting, riding your opponent's slipstream and knocking down traffic cones and other roadside debris. This score is then subtracted from your total time, with the resulting fastest declared the winner regardless of their original placing.

Another twist: your score also doubles as Nitro, with points literally burning away as you deploy the boost. Rather than create an interesting gamble between short-term position gains and post-race time reduction, the implementation of these ideas is flawed. Score has too big an effect, with races easily won by ignoring boost to build points.

Cars have a number of variations, unlocked by winning multiple races with each. These grant score bonuses that increase the balance problems. By the mid-point of the Career mode, I had a car that could easily rack up enough points to boost through an entire race, taking first place with enough left over to knock upwards of 30 seconds off my time.

That's a shame, because the racing is a lot of fun. Cars kick into a drift at the slightest prompt, and smash into each other with abandon. The boost feels madly powerful, and shakes the screen. It looks impressive, but it has been implemented to cover the lack of true speed sensation.

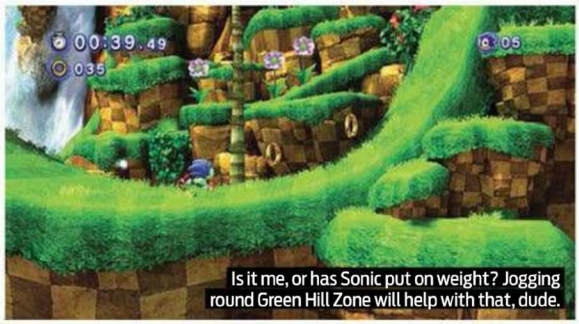
In multiplayer *Ignite* could be a great experience but the online arena is already deserted, which just leaves a Career mode that offers no challenge and is over far too quickly. A short burst of too easy fun at too high a price. ■

PC GAMER 37

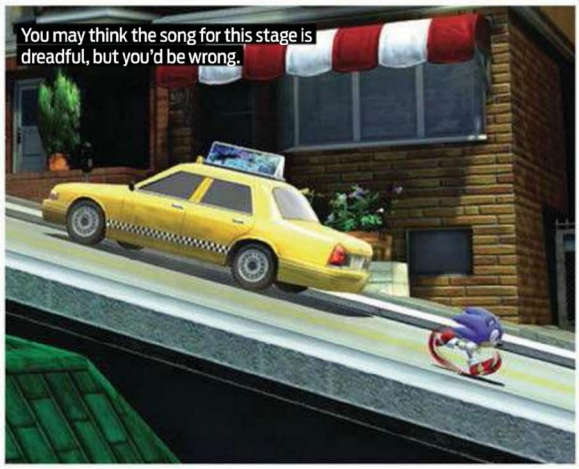
◆ **Expect to pay** £13 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Just A Game ◆ **Developer** Nemesys ◆ **Multiplayer** 2-5 player online ◆ **Link** ignite-racing.com

BLUESHIFTED

SONIC GENERATIONS is slowed down by a decade's worth of baggage. ***By Chris Thursten***



Is it me, or has Sonic put on weight? Jogging round Green Hill Zone will help with that, dude.


You may think the song for this stage is dreadful, but you'd be wrong.

When I was little, my best friend and I would spend entire weekends playing, arguing about, and pretending to be Sonic the Hedgehog. Fast forward 18 years and I'm a games journalist; he's in Afghanistan. Some things change more than others.

Sonic Generations is a grab-bag of almost everything the franchise has been in its 20-year history. A hub world provides access to individual stages, each of which is tackled in both classic Sonic (2D) and modern Sonic (3D) modes. The former are broadly successful, and may be the best new *Sonic* levels in years. The latter are a confusing parade of all the different ways SEGA have tried to translate running quickly into 3D.

If you know what it expects of you, there's a thrill to some of *Generations*' showier moments. If not, prepare to hit a series of brick walls at high speed.

Beating stages unlocks additional challenges that usually showcase a sidekick. Complete these challenges to unlock boss fights, and complete boss fights to unlock the next stages – a structure that suggests SEGA have learned something from the *LEGO* games series.

The presentation is generally top-notch, and revisiting old haunts such as the truck chase from the opening of Sonic Adventure 2 is an enjoyable novelty – but there's the problem. *Generations* works incredibly hard to please existing fans, but doesn't care to generate new ones.

If I was ten years old now, I suspect *Sonic Generations* would mean nothing to me. Then again, if I was ten now I'd probably be more interested in shooting stuff in *Call of Duty*. Some things, I guess, change more than others. ■

PC GAMER 64

◆ **Expect to pay** £20 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Sega ◆ **Developer** Devil's Details ◆ **Multiplayer** No ◆ **Link** sega.co.uk/games/sonic-generations

SRSLY?

Got testicles growing out of your groin? Well then, **SERIOUS SAM 3: BFE** would like a word. ***By Steve Hogarty***

Need to know

What is it?
Prequel to 2001's *Serious Sam* that finally fills those plot holes you've been wondering about.

Influenced by
Pretty demos in 3DMark's benchmarking software and half a dozen of the best *Quake* mods.

Play it on
Intel i5 CPU, 4GB ram, GeForce 460 or Radeon HD 4890

Alternatively
Bulletstorm, 80%

Copy protection
One-time activation, or Steam

No cover. All man. So reads *Serious Sam 3: BFE*'s macho tagline. Those other shooters you've been playing? The ones that let you hide behind things? You were playing a coward. You had formless voxels where your bump-mapped man-genitals should have been. *Serious Sam* despises you and your modern FPS standards, in a fun way that's sometimes difficult to appreciate as intentionally ironic.

As with the previous games, this is an FPS that prides itself on bedlam and ultraviolent, large-scale carnage versus tens of thousands of streaming, screaming monsters. It's defiantly old-school PC in tone.

Even Sam's motion feels weirdly outlandish as he scoots in all directions like a hyperactive ghost, nimble and carefree. This despite carrying a dozen different kinds of weapon, from sledgehammer to shotguns, miniguns, rocket launchers and a leash weapon obviously 'inspired' by *Bulletstorm*.

Enemies spawn in their droves, from cyclopic fanged gorillas and skeletal chain-chucking horses to giant scorpions with miniguns for arms, and headless, sprinting, bomb-fisted kamikaze soldiers.

The latter are particularly obvious above the mayhem thanks to their rapidly approaching, unending screams. Each kind of enemy has its distinct movement and attack patterns, its own audio cues and weaknesses, and it's in prioritising the most dangerous – picking them out of a clattering bunch of 50 or 60 foes – that challenge lies. Of course, challenge also lies in the scarcity of ammo, the lack of regenerating health (on anything above the easiest two difficulty settings) and the unforgiving relentlessness with which its developers, Croteam, inundate you with angry creatures.

So hooray that the campaign is playable in anything up to 16 player co-op, and although the population of enemies is adjusted to match, the proceedings are decidedly more relaxed when played this way. You respawn on death, for example, rather than having to restart from your last save. Alternative game modes allow you to enforce a lives limit if you want to maintain some risk of adversity. Either way, *Serious Sam* is at its most gratifying in co-op.

Survival mode is a distillation of the form, pitting you and (if you like) co-op buddies against waves of increasingly tough enemies in one of two arenas.

Same of Sam

Despite introducing a *Duke Nukem*-lite plot as shlocky as it is charmless, the singleplayer campaign feels like a lingering, grudging concession. A heavily templated and mazelike series of levels into which the meat-paste of *Serious Sam*'s sublime and pure death arcade has been pumped. There are a few moments of beautiful design: the occasional genius placement of a surprise onslaught of kamikaze soldiers, the triggering of a shrewd mousetrap. There's little beauty in the visuals though, somehow greyer and less expansive than 2005's second *Sam*. It's left to some swanky new particle effects to impress us.

The return of *Serious Sam*'s most familiar weapons and enemies, at the expense of much new content, will just as likely leave you exhausted as elated. But if you felt even vaguely like fist-pumping upon hearing the tagline 'No cover. All man.' give *Serious Sam 3: BFE* a punt. ■

"Ultraviolent carnage vs tens of thousands of monsters"

Spot the deference

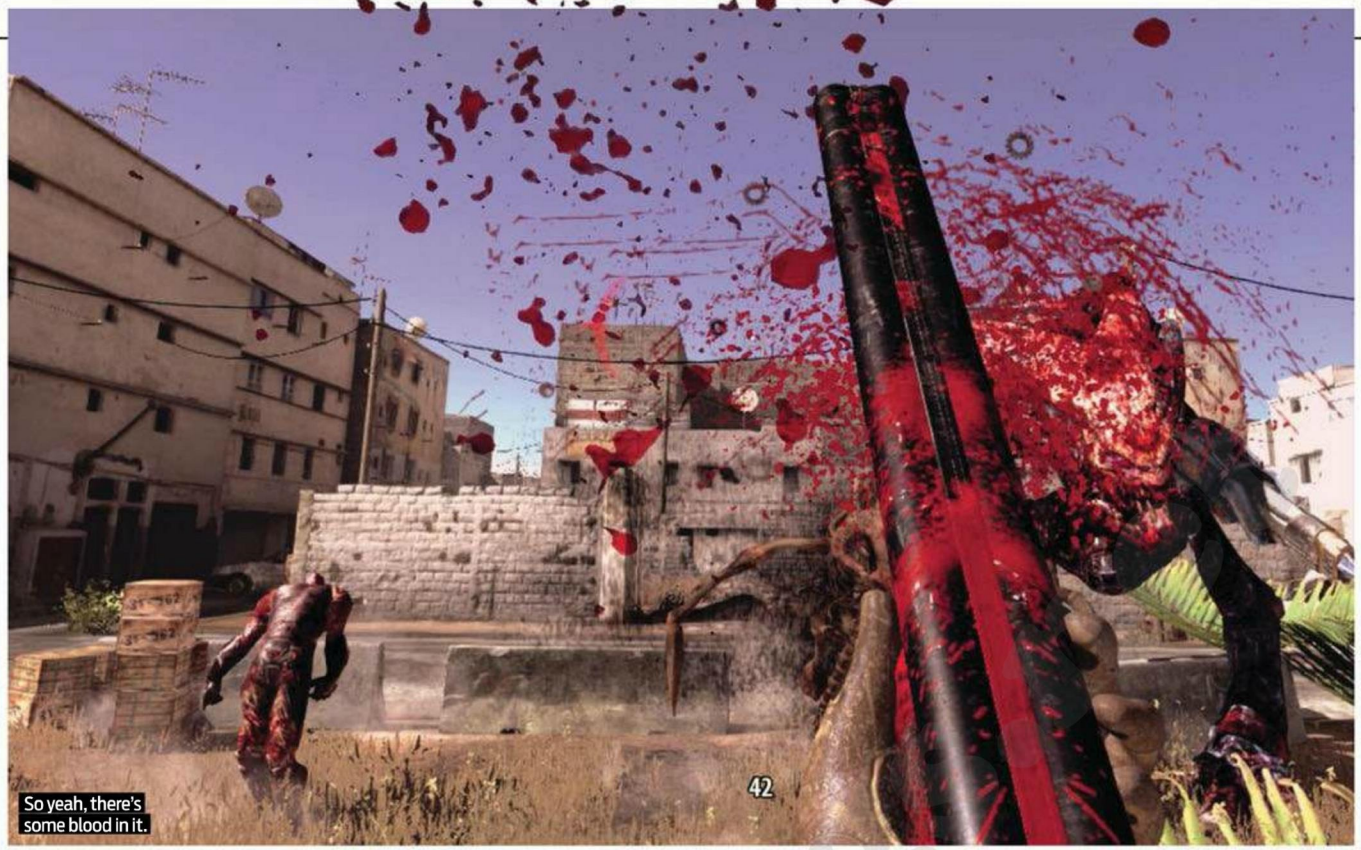
Bulletstorm: doing it first and mostly doing it better

◆ **Expect to pay** £30 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Devolver Digital
◆ **Developer** Croteam ◆ **Multiplayer** Up to 16 ◆ **Link** serioussam.com

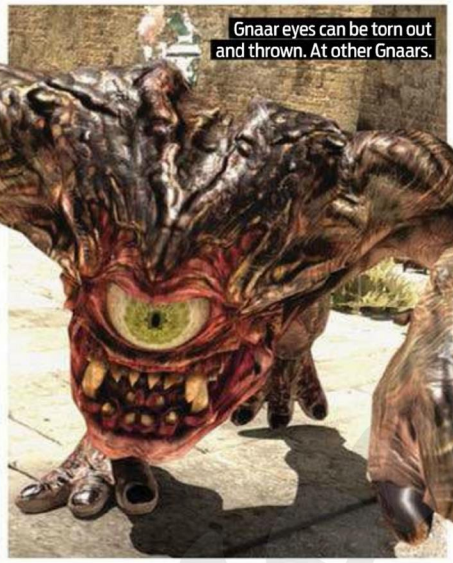
VERDICT

A hugely fun, mega-frenetic co-op shooter that embodies the soul, and depth, of '90s twitch shooters.

PC GAMER **70**



So yeah, there's some blood in it.


Gnaar eyes can be torn out and thrown. At other Gnaars.

The longer you last in Survival mode, the less not-destroyed the scenery becomes.

Seriously, Sam, close your mouth.

Gnaars flock, like innocent budgies.

Hey look everybody, it's the actual definition of visceral.

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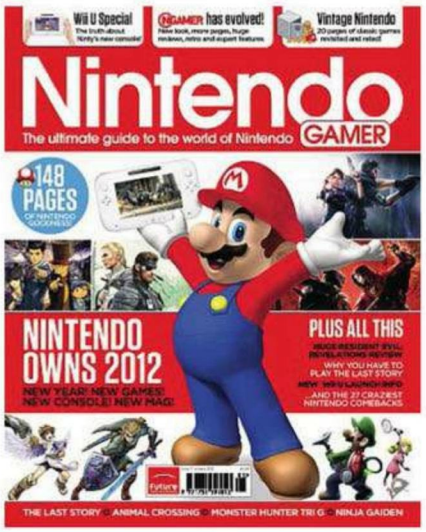

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- Written by experts for fans
- The ultimate guide to the world of Nintendo

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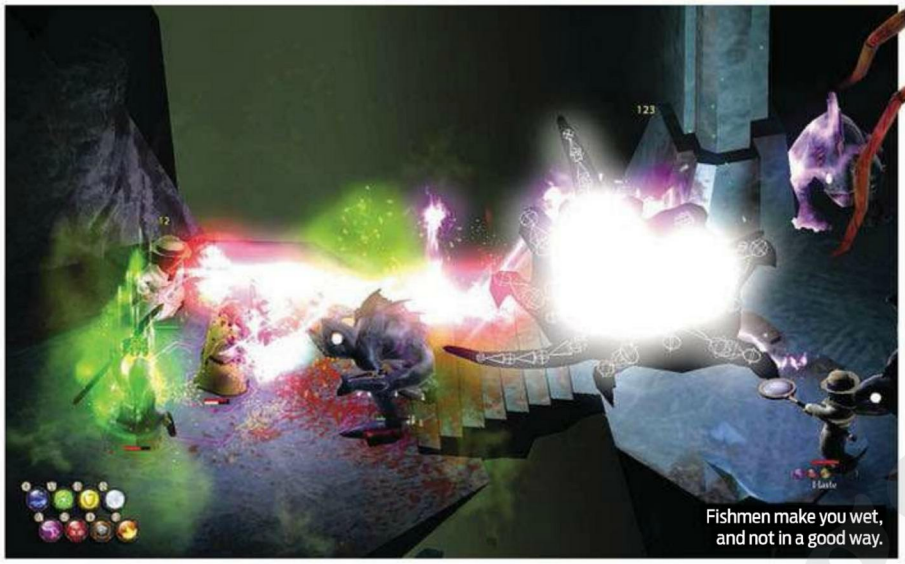
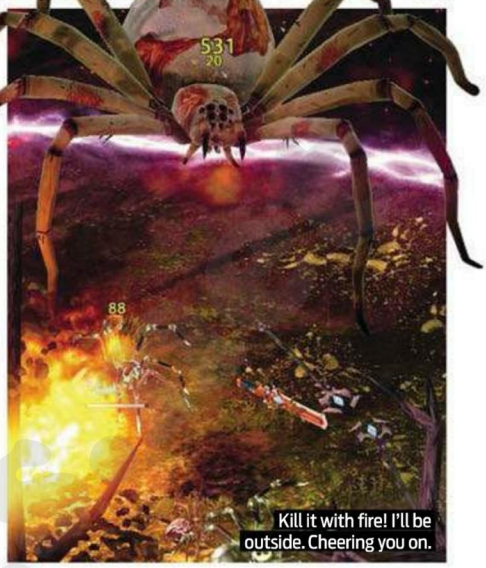
Wonder what Lovecraft would have made of this.

Hope you enjoy this fight, you've go two more rounds.

This is a triumph! For magic.


Fishmen make you wet, and not in a good way.


Kill it with fire! I'll be outside. Cheering you on.

WORLD OF LOVECRAFT

MAGICKA: THE STARS ARE LEFT adds a dash of HP's source. ***By Richard Cobbett***

Need to know

What is it?
A Cthulhu-themed *Magicka* DLC pack, with three new maps and two challenge modes.

Influenced by
Call of Cthulhu

Play it on
Pentium 4, 2GB RAM, 12MB 3D card

Alternatively
Bloodline Champions

Copy protection
Steam

Gaming's spice rack is a scary thing. Is that FPS starting to taste a little bland? Add zombies. Need a little kick to your fantasy game? Try a dollop of Elder God, perhaps with a touch of cinnamon for that funny aftertaste.

Magicka's Lovecraft-themed DLC goes little further than this basic flavouring. Your group of up to four wizards has accidentally woken the Big Calamari, and only copious amounts of fire bombs, lightning walls, ARSE mines and whatever else you can mix up with your trusty palette of elements are going to send him back to bed without his supper.

The first chapter offers no Lovecraft elements at all, set on the wizards' Scandinavian-style home turf. The second introduces some annoying cultists and sea monsters as you travel to the village of 'Outsmouth', but it's only the third and final chapter, set in R'lyeh, that takes the battle to the Deep Ones.

This DLC's short length doesn't mean it's an easy ride. While *Magicka* is always best as a four-player game, only the most experienced players should try going it alone. Some expansions take the gloves off early. This one sneers at the mere concept of wearing gloves, producing multi-wave arena fights and giant bosses right from the start. The one concession to solo players is a fairy companion recently patched into the game, giving you one free revive per checkpoint at the cost of being a tiresome parody of Navi from *Ocarina of Time*.

In a full group, your quadrupled firepower, plus your ability to combine elements more easily and to revive downed comrades, makes things much smoother. Any reasonably experienced group should finish in a couple of hours, with only the last boss presenting a major difficulty spike. Getting four players together is simple, as only the hosting player needs to own the DLC. Anyone with a regular copy of *Magicka* can hop into their game.

Beyond the main campaign, you also get a couple of challenge maps – one with a tendency to break almost immediately – and a few new toys. An Investigator's robe complete with adorable magnifying glass staff is available at the start, and a waterproof Cultist robe is a reward for completing the campaign. As for new spells, by far the coolest you'll find is 'Portal'. Guess what it does.

As a Lovecraft parody, *The Stars are Left* is a deeply underbaked adventure, even at this price, and only the most hardcore need apply to take on the singleplayer campaign. It's not a bad way to get your gang of wizards back together for another evening's spell-slinging fun though, especially if you split the cost of it between you. ■

◆ **Expect to pay** £4 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Paradox Interactive
◆ **Developer** Arrowhead Game Studios ◆ **Multiplayer** Up to 4 players ◆ **Link** www.magickagame.com

VERDICT

Underwhelming for its Lovecraft premise, but as another chance to enjoy *Magicka*'s crazy combat, it just about earns its keep.

PC GAMER **62**

ROCKING

Exposing the seedy underbelly of asteroid mining with **ROCHARD**. *By Duncan Geere*

That's not a gravity gun, it's a G-lifter. You'll probably call it a gravity gun, right around the time you say to your friends, "Hey! You should try this really fun platformer I've been playing. It's set in an asteroid mine, and you throw yourself and your environments around using a... uhh... what was it called? It's basically a gravity gun."

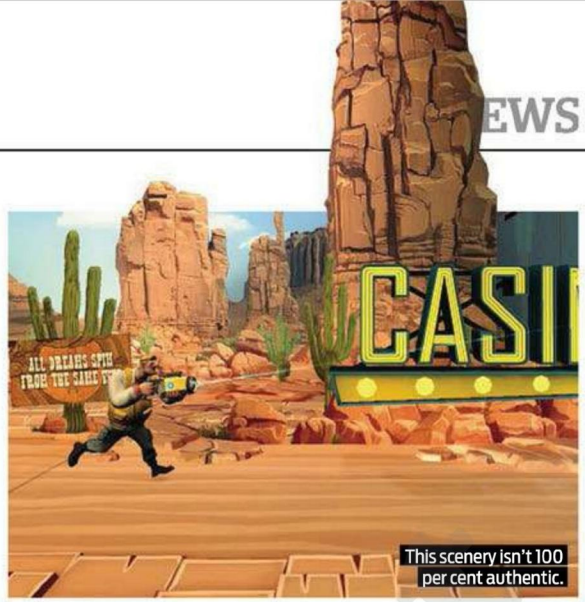
You're John Rochard – which is pronounced 'ro-shard' rather than 'rock-hard' – a miner who makes a startling discovery under the surface of an asteroid, turning your world upside-down (literally) as gravity reverses. The two main mechanics are that aforementioned G-lifter and the ability to reduce the gravitational field around you.

What that usually translates to is hurling objects at the heads of enemy soldiers and pulling off death-defying leaps. You unlock various new abilities but they generally just widen your options, letting you pull turrets out of the wall, fire sticky bombs or reverse the gravity around specific objects.

What's impressive is the learning curve. You'll rarely get stuck and when you die, it's generally because you're attempting something ambitious, not because you're not good at the game. It would be easy to just creep through it safely but that would be missing the point – making the tubby, gruff John Rochard dance like a ballerina by manipulating the gravity around him is what this game is about, and it doesn't really matter if you die a few times along the way.

Rochard is just four or five hours long, but it has boatloads of charm and a surprising amount of character. With a price tag so low, it's hard not to recommend it. ■

PC GAMER 82



This scenery isn't 100 per cent authentic.

Rochard spends a lot of time on elevators.

◆ **Expect to pay** £7.99 ◆ **Release** Out Now ◆ **Publisher** In-house
◆ **Developer** Recoil Games ◆ **Multiplayer** None ◆ **Link** rochardthegame.com

FLY BY

Fluid control system, gorgeous world – but **INMOMENTUM** is too sparse. *By Phil Savage*

Falling to my death, I inched close enough to a floating column to double wall-jump, manoeuvre around a corner and, with a deft third jump, soar skyward to safety. It was the moment when what had seemed like a cumbersome and frustrating control system clicked, and everything felt natural.

inMomentum is a first-person free-running racing game. It's an arcade *Mirror's Edge*, set in a beautiful world of abstract floating blocks (much like that game's *Pure Time Trials* DLC). But while *ME* was happy to coax you along, *inMomentum* patiently waits for you to get up to speed.

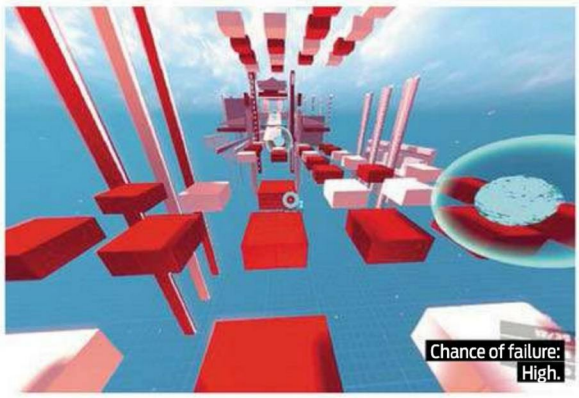
Jumps are performed with a right-click of the mouse, while the left button allows you to make... well, 'wall-jump' is the wrong term. Get in proximity of any vertical surface and you'll propel yourself a physics-defying distance into the air. You can do two of these per surface, so it's possible to glide through a course, improvising new paths until you run out of walls. Or skill. The feeling of bouncing over blocks and spiralling up columns is amazing. Always just a mis-step away from failure, the line between elegant acrobatics and futile clicking is an excitingly thin one.

There are occasional glitches – getting caught on the corner of walls being the most annoying – but the real problem is that all but the most hardcore of leaderboard chasers will quickly run out of things to do. The singleplayer consists solely of time-trial variations and while there is a multiplayer race mode, I've yet to see anyone in it.

inMomentum feels like a showcase of a brilliant game mechanic, but that doesn't excuse the sparseness of the game around it. ■

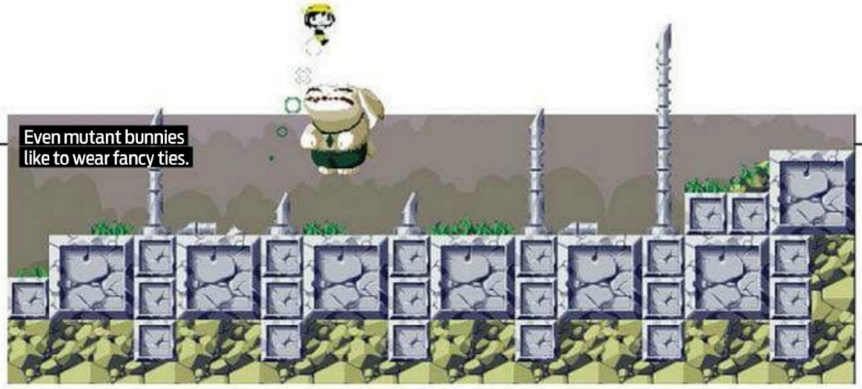
PC GAMER 59

The freefall course is an objective-free playground.


Chance of failure: High.

◆ **Expect to pay** £7 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** White Rabbit Interactive
◆ **Developer** Digital Arrow ◆ **Multiplayer** 2-16 player online ◆ **Link** bit.ly/rWysXL

Outside of the challenges, you can always revert to the original art.


Even mutant bunnies like to wear fancy ties.

Tsk, they still haven't put up a railing here.

Hey, this room used to be on fire! (OK, not really.)

SPELUNKIER

Underground hit about underground hitting gets an HD upgrade with **CAVE STORY+**. *By Chris Donlan*

Need to know

What is it?
A retro-tinged platformer with great upgradable weapons.

Influenced by
Metroid, Castlevania

Play it on
Intel Core Duo 2.0GHz, 512MB RAM

Alternatively
Aquaria, 81%

Copy protection
Steam

Over on a *Cave Story* messageboard, X-Calibar has a problem with *Cave Story+*. It's to do with Balrog, a boss who looks like a suitcase. In the old days, his catchphrase used to be "Huzzah!" Now, thanks to the HD upgrade's alternate translation, it's "Oh yeah!" X-Calibar isn't happy. "'Oh yeah'? What kind of charge is that?! Even 'Booyah!' might make more sense."

If you're wondering how a game could inspire criticism of this granularity, you probably haven't played *Cave Story*. Daisuke Amaya's homebrew classic is a uniquely polite 2D platform adventure in which you're dropped into a subterranean world where a villainous doctor threatens a group of bunny people. You save the day by exploring, shooting weird animals, fighting bosses, and collecting items that, more often than not, open up new parts of the environment, where the whole thing repeats.

Except the whole thing never *feels* like it's repeating. *Cave Story*'s levels manage to be intricate without appearing confusing, and they retain a clear sense of forward momentum even as the storyline branches and the Easter eggs pile up.

An orderly series of unlocks brings shape to the game's wayward narrative, and each new gadget you're handed broadens your options, allowing you to double-jump with special boots, for example, or use the kickback from the machinegun to pogo your way from one ledge to the next.

There's a levelling system, but it focuses on your weapons rather than your character, and it rewards skilful players with more powerful attacks while punishing the careless with regular downgrades if they take too many risks. It's a reminder that, while *Cave Story* is sugary on the surface, it's pleasantly tart underneath. Even before you turn to *Cave Story+*'s new bonus challenges – a boss rush, some pitiless platforming gauntlets, and the option to repeat the campaign with a different lead – you're going to struggle to see absolutely everything on your first playthrough.

By the time you're considering that second playthrough, you'll have crossed over to the other side, joining the informal community of speed-runners, FAQ writers and *Cave Story* cartographers who have fallen into this deceptively slight platformer never to emerge again.

It's not so bad down here, though: there are secrets to find, endings to unlock, and plenty of lovely weapons to master. *Cave Story*'s upgraders, Nicalis, may have instigated a contentious dehuzzahification of the original, but they also delivered a perky and stirring soundtrack remix, and new art that evolves the retro stylings of the first game without lapsing into twee indulgence.

It's a sensitive reworking, and *Cave Story* is entirely deserving of the attention. Huzzah – as a dear old friend of mine used to say. ■

◆ **Expect to pay** £6.99 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Nicalis ◆ **Developer** Nicalis, Studio Pixel
◆ **Multiplayer** None ◆ **Link** www.nicalis.com

VERDICT

Enhanced with hi-res sprites and a spiffier soundtrack, this indie success story has received the update it deserves.

PC GAMER **88**

PACIFIER

Keep geometry sexy in **FRACTAL: MAKE BLOOMS NOT WAR**. *By Kim Richards*

Be not fooled by its clean, minimal presentation. *Fractal's* solid cranial tests will both entrance and enrage you, putting this original puzzler in the same league as hyper-addictive time-sinks *Bejewelled* and *Chime*.

The premise – as with all addictive puzzlers – is simple. You're presented with a large hexagonal grid, and must click on an empty space to push surrounding hexagons around in order to create hexagonal groups (or Blooms in *Fractal*-speak).

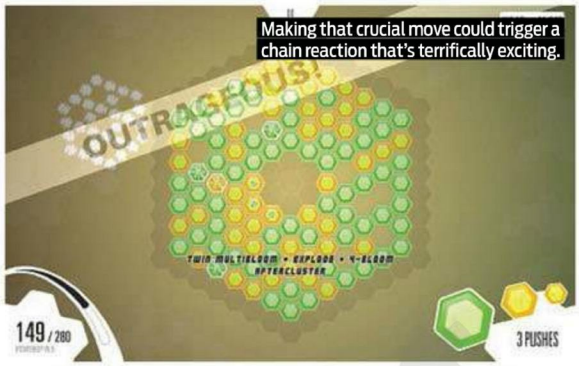
While an easy mechanic to grasp at first, the action is quickly notched up with the introduction of multiple colours, and tiles with benefits – points-boosters, explosive bombs that clear surrounding areas and lightning strikes that'll happily destroy all of the same-hued panels.

Add a limited amount of Pushes per puzzle, and you have a serious test of intelligence. The key here is to not squander your moves. Click impatiently, and you'll regret it as your move counter dwindles.

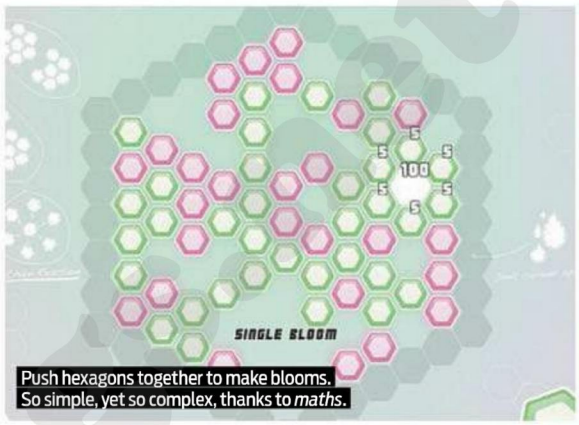
As well as Campaign mode, it offers a snappier Arcade option for time-limit sadists, and an even more perplexing Puzzle section that gently, yet efficiently teaches you how to be frugal with your moves. Sort of like a strict monk.

To top it off, the game is an aesthetic pleasure to lose yourself in. The visuals are bright diamanté rainbows beamed directly into your eyeballs, while the ebb and flow of the trancy soundtrack paces the complex challenges perfectly. As a result, *Fractal* is one of those rare titles that you'll boot up just to have a quick go, only to find that it's six hours later and the dog's eaten your dinner. Yum. ■

PC GAMER **84**



Making that crucial move could trigger a chain reaction that's terrifically exciting.



Push hexagons together to make blooms. So simple, yet so complex, thanks to *maths*.

◆ **Expect to pay** £4.99 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Cipher Prime Studios ◆ **Developer** In-house ◆ **Multiplayer** None ◆ **Link** www.cipherprime.com

HYPOCRITICAL

GROTESQUE TACTICS 2: DUNGEONS AND DONUTS eats itself. *By Tom Hatfield*

If you don't remember the first entry in this parody RPG series, that's okay, because neither does protagonist Drake. He suffers from hero's amnesia, a common affliction of sequels, as the game gleefully points out. *Grotesque Tactics 2* has a lot of fun pointing out the flaws in other games, so it's a shame it has no interest in fixing them.

When a spoilt princess demands a piece of fried chicken to let you form a guild it seems like an amusing parody of the arbitrary demands of RPG quest givers. Yet when she then demands a donut, and another character wants a candy cane, you realise that being aware of genre clichés doesn't mean it avoids them.

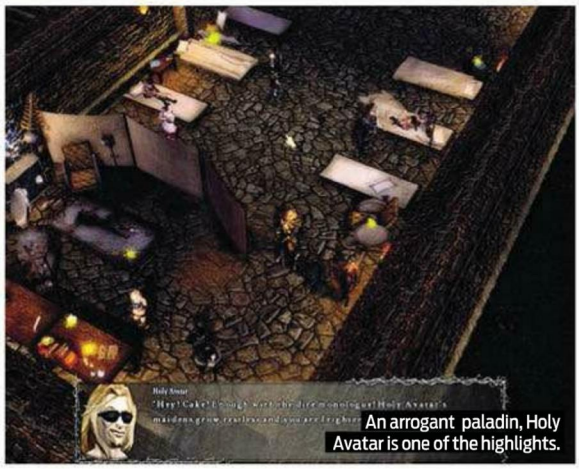
It's the slow and uninvolved combat system that really lets the game down. Characters run around dungeons in real time, but switch to a turn-based grid system as soon as enemies appear. Except the grid doesn't serve any purpose, as the angle and pattern of attacks make little difference.

All of which is a real shame, because some of the jokes *are* funny, and are delivered by a voice cast that, although not exceptional, are at least full of enthusiasm. There are memorable and funny characters here, like vain and arrogant paladin Holy Avatar and people-eating goth girl Sweet Violence. However, to meet them you'll have to slog through hours of dull and unimaginative combat.

Every time *Grotesque Tactics 2* invokes a classic game for a joke, you'll wonder why you aren't playing that instead. Even the best moments of parody are undermined by the fact that it simply isn't as good as the games it mocks. Shame. ■

PC GAMER **46**

Expect to spend a lot of time watching spiders get into formation.


An arrogant paladin, Holy Avatar is one of the highlights.

◆ **Expect to pay** £17 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Meridian4 ◆ **Developer** Silent Dreams, Headup Games ◆ **Multiplayer** None ◆ **Link** www.grotesque-game.de

GRIPPING

BATMAN: ARKHAM CITY turns the madhouse out onto the streets of Gotham. ***By Martin Davies***

Need to know

What is it?
Sneaking, punching superhero sequel, now in a gloomy open world.

Influenced by
Just Cause, Splinter Cell, BioShock

Play it on
Core 2 Duo, 2GB RAM, ATI 3850HD, 512 MB / GeForce 8800 GT 512MB

Alternatively
Assassin's Creed: Revelations, 71%

Copy protection
SecuROM and Games for Windows Live

We've seen a wide range of Bat-flavours over the years: campy Batman, angsty Batman and, thanks to writer Frank Miller's increasing mental derailment, batshit Batman.

Here we get straight-down-the-line Batman. *Arkham City* captures his technique, but lets some of his character slip away into the night. For a hi-tech super-ninja spandex vigilante, he is peculiarly bland.

Luckily, the Dark Knight is not a man of words, but of deeds – and this game, like its predecessor, has them nailed. Batman zip-lines, grapnels and swoops between the moonlit rooftops of this open-world city, emerging from the shadows to hammer clusters of goons. He even finds time for a spot of light puzzling and the odd platforming challenge.

The action is magicked straight from the films and comics, where discretion and detection are as important as slamming Bat-fists through the faces of the criminally insane. Well, almost as important. Batman in motion is awesome to behold: he sneaks and swoops with a deft mo-cap mastery, and annihilates room after room of thuggish mental patients with fluid violence, catching and deflecting blows in a storm of semi-procedural devastation.

It's just a pity that whenever he opens the flap in his gigantic chin he proves to be a right old Bat-chump. The world's greatest detective only ever seems adept at detecting the extremely obvious, and when he tries his hand at humour Catwoman tells him to shut up – as well she should. It's wise to leave the jokes to The Joker, who returns here wittier and more weasly than ever, although looking a little worse for wear after his encounter with the Titan serum at the end of *Arkham Asylum*.

"Batman is not really big on care in the community"

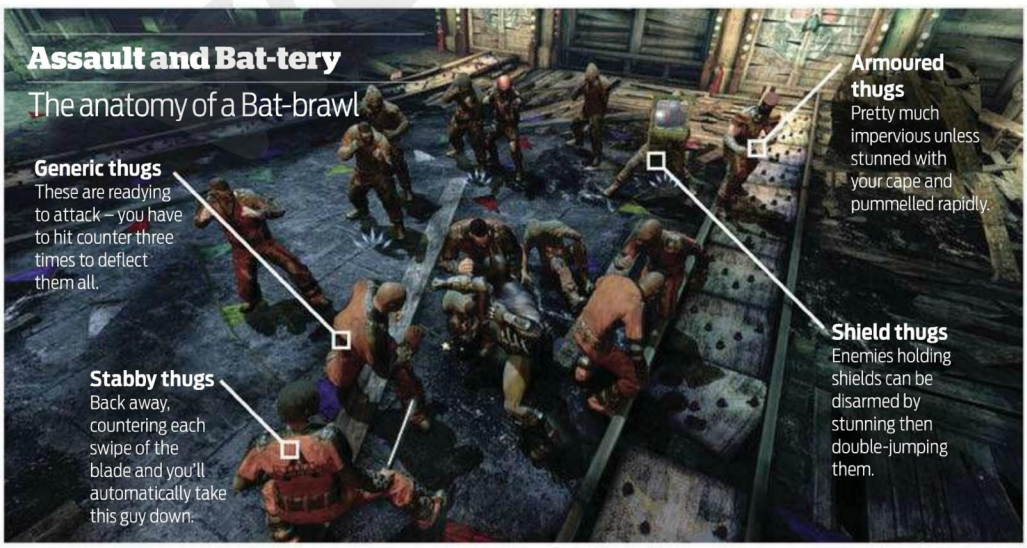
Crim city

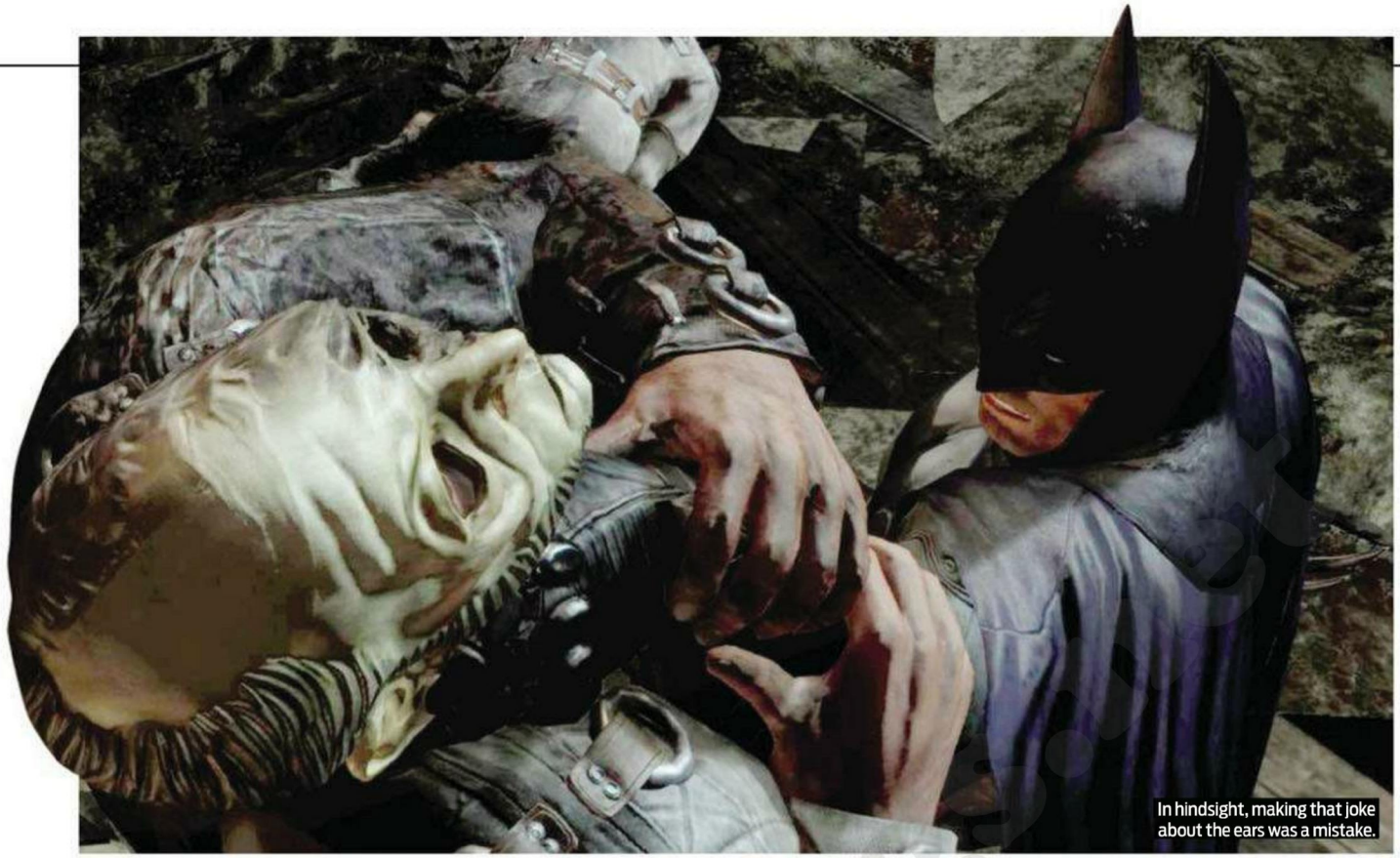
The plot picks up some time after Batman's efforts mopping up the mass breakout at the maximum security mental asylum. The focus has now shifted to a larger portion of Gotham, which has been cordoned off and turned into an Escape From New York-style prison city. The why and how are barely worth acknowledging. The best Batman stories redeploy the iconic figures into larger allegories, and while this has a heavy-hitting narrative payoff in its last moment, it is otherwise nakedly a greatest hits. An excuse to cram together as many of Gotham's notorious evildoers as possible in one confined space and have Batman beat the XP out of them one by one.

It's not *that* confined though. Gone are the hubs of Arkham Island. Here we get an open world of guttering neon and gothic decay, a horseshoe of heavily compartmentalised urban squalor, surrounded by frigid water and barbed wire. It's not the most expansive of cityscapes in gaming, and any distinct character for its various locales struggles to emerge – probably because you spend more time flying over them than actually being in them.

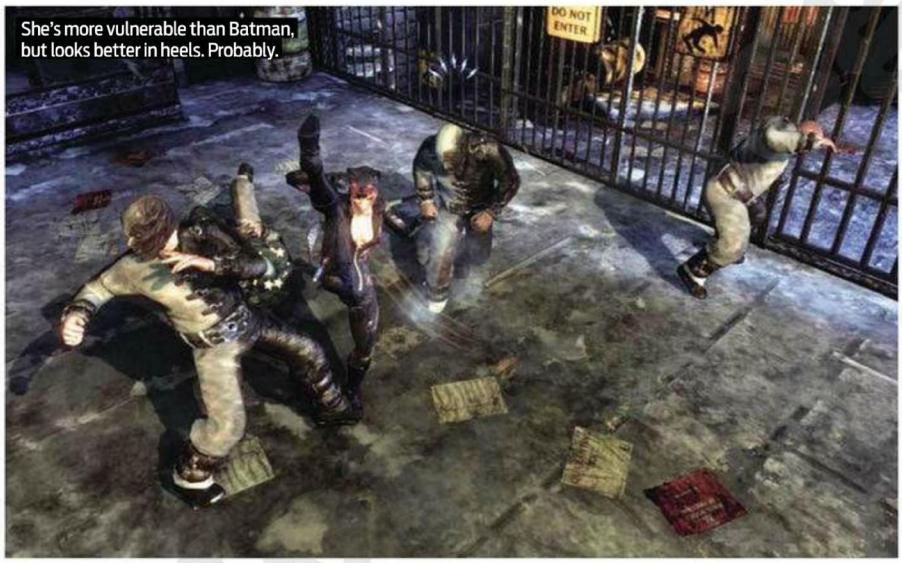
Nonetheless, it's dense with diversions and detail, and Batman has full rein from the off, his utility belt immediately bristling with gadgetry that similar games would take hours to unlock. The grapnel and glide are not just ways to escape combat, but the thrilling means by which you turn the environment into your playground, soaring beneath the ghostly beam of the Bat Signal.

The central quest, when you find time for it, is a meaty thing, coming in at about 14 hours on my leisurely playthrough. It suffers a little from recycling its locations: flimsy plot elements ricochet you back and forth between the same villains' linear lairs, and although they change a little each time, revealing new routes and the scars of the battles fought within, it does end up feeling a little like rigmarole. Nonetheless, the pace, variety and craft of each lair is expertly managed. Whereas the preceding game made a starker distinction between fisticuffs and stealth sections, here there is a more gradual segue between the massive brawls, which now fill the screen with goons, and challenges where discretion is key.





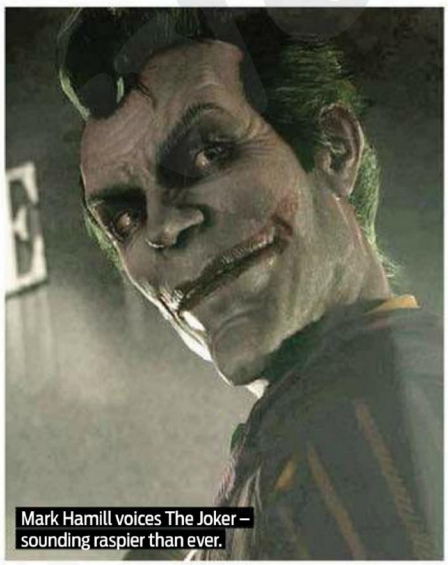
In hindsight, making that joke about the ears was a mistake.



She's more vulnerable than Batman, but looks better in heels. Probably.

Batman's gargoyle impression was coming on a treat.

It's all in the wrist. And the feet. And knees. And fists.

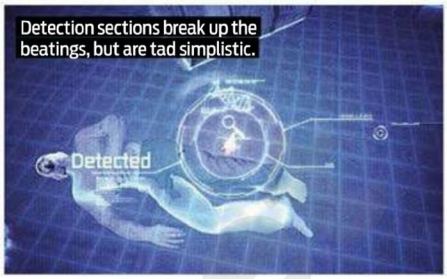


Mark Hamill voices The Joker – sounding raspier than ever.

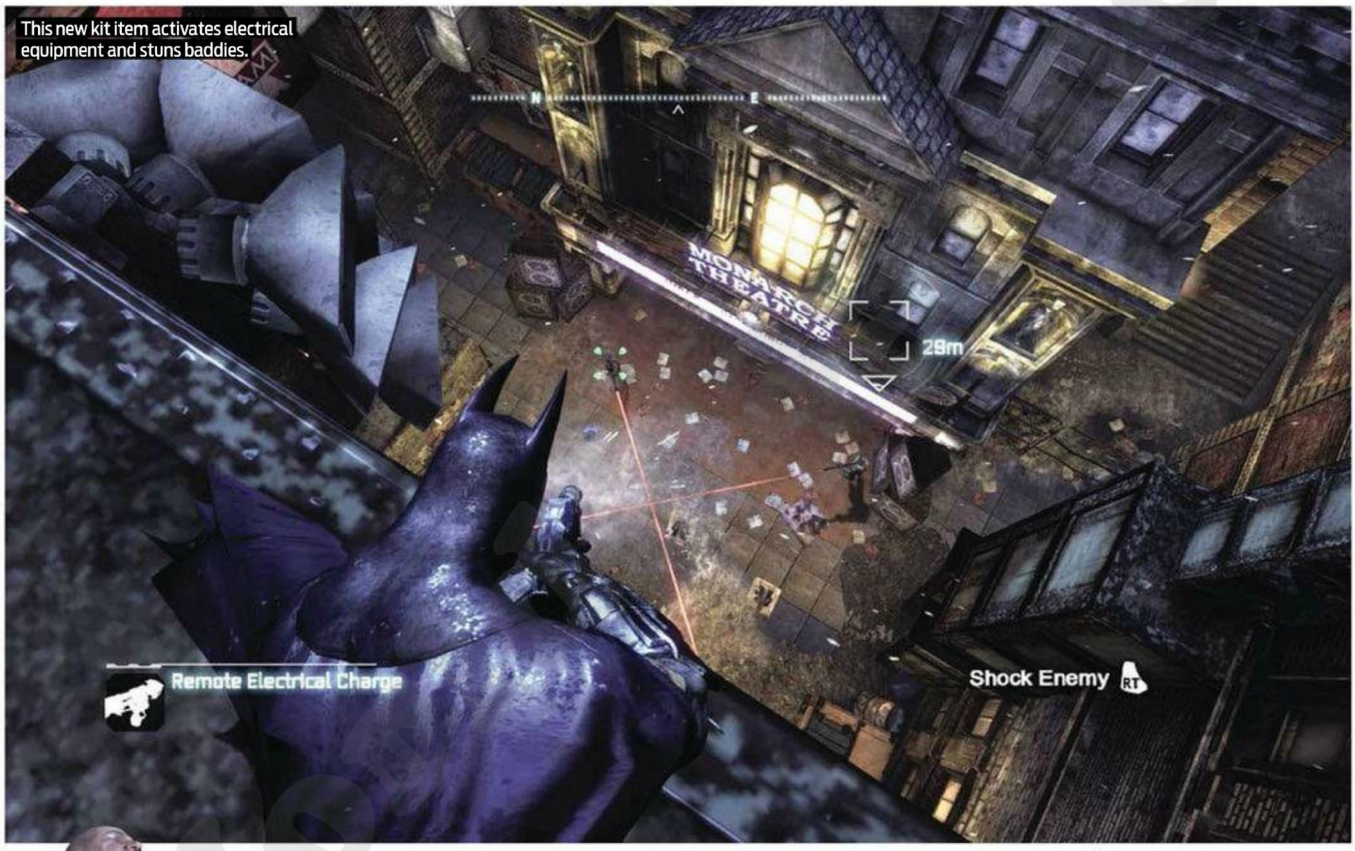
Criminals are pinatas full of yummy XP bats. Kick them free.

Solomon Grundy: one of the many walk-on, wheel-off villains.

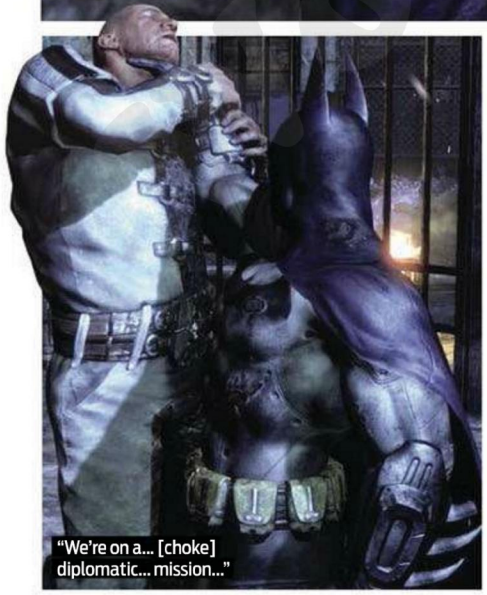
Lord luv a duck: the Penguin is now a cockney mobster.



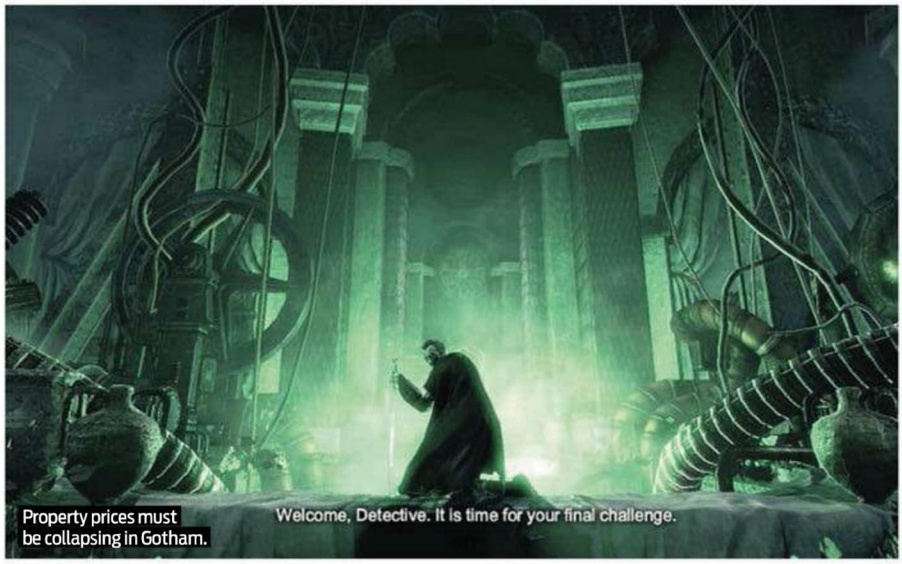
Detection sections break up the beatings, but are tad simplistic.



This new kit item activates electrical equipment and stuns baddies.



"We're on a... [choke] diplomatic... mission..."



Property prices must be collapsing in Gotham.

This time, the introduction of new, deadlier opponents is rapid, and the game wastes little time before throwing guns into the mix. While Batman can soak up a clip or two, prolonged exposure to gunfire leads straight to the reload screen – where, aggravatingly, your failure is further mocked by a supervillain. Tossing a few smoke pellets down while you grapnel a gargoyle high above allows you to evade their aim – so long as they don't have infrared goggles – and the environments are riddled with interconnecting escape routes. Floor grates and ducts wind around each room, and there are plenty of low walls and drop points from which to launch an attack, before vanishing into the shadows again.

However, some fights leave you with no alternative but to dive in. As in the last game, such battles are a matter of restraint and timing. Enemies swarm you, readying themselves to deliver punches, kicks and stabs. You don't precisely choose how Batman attacks – you select the direction of his assault and unleash the procedural animation system, shattering his opponents with a free-flowing chain of blows and building up a combo meter that allows you to deliver permanent takedowns. Button mashing gets you some way with unarmed enemies, but as the bodies crowd in, knowing when not to attack quickly becomes just as important, giving yourself time between combos to tap the counter button and deflecting incoming fists to bone-shattering effect. Batman's solution for the criminally insane may be resolutely non-lethal, but he's not really big on care in the community either.

These punch-ups typically last twice as long as my excitement in them, but each is initially exhilarating to behold – particularly when it all goes right. It doesn't always go right. The battles take a lot out of your direct control in order to deliver flowing brutality, and the game's ability to guess your intent is often stretched to breaking point. When multiple types of enemies are introduced, each requiring a specific combo, the automation with which Batman selects his next opponent becomes critical. It's frustrating to accidentally vault into a cattleprod or waft your cape pointlessly over some inert goon, leaving the thug next to him free to heave a car door into your kidneys.

Even more aggravating are the game's attempts to help you in combat, popping up paragraphs of tutorial text in the centre of the screen. It's like suddenly succumbing to cataracts, mid-fight. The options to turn off such instructions are seemingly ineffective.

While the pointy-eared-one has several leads to pursue for the main mission, he has no shortage of distractions. Many of these are substantial quest chains in themselves, each focusing on a central villain. Deadshot has left plenty of perforated political prisoners for you to investigate using your detective vision to determine bullet trajectories and follow blood spatters, while Zsasz acts as the motive for a protracted point-to-point race, challenging Batman to reach the next ringing phone before he carves up another victim.

By far the most diverting, however, is The Riddler, who is once again neatly used to excuse a collectibles minigame. Riddler trophies dot the alleyways, rooftops and crawlspaces of Arkham City, some placed in plain sight, others locked in elaborate contraptions that require the activation of magnets or timed trip-switches. You'll need to trade-in these trinkets for the coordinates of Riddler's next victim – members of a medical team he has abducted and trussed up in mechanical deathtraps.

"So, we meet again"

Then there are the boss battles. At least they advance the last game's gruelling fare of attack cycles, weak points and QuickTime Events. The best are unobjectionable and look cool, but the worst fail to communicate the route to success, or actively mislead you. One battle has respawning henchmen, but you might not realise it until you fill the room with unconscious bodies. Another villain has a forcefield that prevents direct attacks – unless they are stealthy, as I belatedly discovered. Because his forcefield wouldn't expect that.

Working out the peripheries of the designer's rigid plan for you is sometimes harder than it needs to be. It's particularly true in the game's prescriptive puzzle and platform elements, but even at the most granular level, your ability to grapnel onto things remains entirely in the game's control, and sometimes this power is inexplicably withheld. Even so, *Arkham City* offers a greater level of expression through your various abilities than its predecessor, and is overwhelmingly generous with the distractions it lays before you from the get-go. Even if its fundamental fighting system strains at the seams, even if Batman himself is a bit of a plank, this is as expansive a realisation of the superhero as there has ever been.

So broad, in fact, that it's only when every collectible has been hoovered up, every crime scene scoured, every crook crushed, that you'll think to wonder: where was the Dark Knight's depth? ■

◆ Expect to pay £35 **◆ Release** Out now **◆ Publisher** Warner Bros **◆ Developer** Rocksteady Studios **◆ Multiplayer** None **◆ Link** www.batmanarkhamcity.org

It's a mog's game

Some missions let you play as Bats' feline friend

Thief vision
A less useful version of Batman's alternative vision mode, as it doesn't pick out geometry.

Whip
Dizzies thugs like Batman's cape, and latches onto things like Batman's grapnel.

Caltrops
Throw them in battle, or sprinkle them around a corner to send enemies skidding.

Bolas
Can be flung to temporarily tangle an opponent and knock them to the floor.

Ceiling traversal
Catwoman can scamper all over anything covered in wire mesh – all while wearing high heels.

"It's like suddenly succumbing to cataracts mid-fight"

VERDICT

Bat-brawling shows wear and Batman's a charisma void, but the freedom and depth of the open world are mesmerising.

PC GAMER **80**

YOU'LL MÉNAGE

TRINE 2 is pretty enough to blind you to the lack of progress in the series. ***By Jon Blyth***

Need to know

What is it?
A fairytale physics puzzle platformer.

Influenced by
Lost Vikings

Play it on
2GHz dual core CPU, 1GB RAM, GeForce 8800 or above

Alternatively
Rochard, *Blocks that Matter*

Copy protection
Steam. DRM-free versions coming in 2012.

Trine 2 is less of a sequel, and more radical cosmetic surgery. Frozenbyte have exploded the formula into a beautiful, rainbow-sodden spectacle. You don't realise how few purple and green crystal-lit caverns there are out there, until you're forced to stop and bask in one.

Trine is a fairytale platforming adventure, based around a magical floating sconce that's bound together the souls of a wizard, a knight and a thief. The story itself is sweet enough – perfectly charming and a shade too earnest – but what really drives you, beyond the irresistible instinct in platformers to travel to the right, is the satisfaction that's gained from solving the inventive physics-based puzzles.

Playing solo, you can swap between characters instantly as you require their different skills. The Wizard can levitate objects, conjure boxes, and eventually planks, allowing him to bridge gaps and create steps. But he's all wizardy and crap in a fight, so tap him out when goblins and bosses appear.

The Thief can fire a grappling hook and swing from wooden surfaces, and her bow makes her the best ranged fighter. Then there's the Warrior, who dishes out the melee damage with his sword, deflects lava with his shield, and smashes delicate stuff from afar with his hammer.

Trine again

If you've played the first game, you'll be thinking "well, this sounds pretty familiar. Shouldn't you be focusing on the new stuff?" The weakest thing about *Trine 2* is how broadly identical it is to the first game. The energy bar has gone, and there's online co-op play, but *Trine 2* amounts to a skill reset and a bunch of gorgeous new levels.

The flexibility of the puzzles and the overlapping powers mean that often there's no pure, one-way solution. In particular, the Thief's agility becomes less essential as the Wizard learns to conjure more simultaneous objects. Solo, this doesn't matter. Multiplayer changes the nature of the game.

First off, and this is such a superficial observation that I feel obliged to say it in a stupid way, it's nice to do a solve on a puzzle with a friend. The first *Trine* had local multiplayer, bizarrely hidden in a sub-sub-menu, but *Trine 2* brings it to the main menu, and adds online matchmaking and text chat. It's now easy to drop into a game with strangers or pals.

More fundamentally, dividing the powers between three players, instead of one player swapping between the powers as he sees fit, means that progress that could only previously be made by one character now has to be achievable by all three. Frozenbyte have addressed this in two ways. Firstly, the Wizard can levitate items that he's standing on in multiplayer. But life's too easy with a magic carpet.

A more elegant solution is Unlimited mode. Tucked away in the 'host a game' options, this allows multiples of each class on screen. It's more chaotic, more flexible, and more fun. It solves some huffier moments, like when the Thief realises she's a complete spare wheel. And that moment where the Wizard decides to avoid a boss fight, hanging out by the partner-regenerating checkpoints while an endless stream of Thieves and Knights do the work.

Trine 2 may retread a lot of old ground, but it's beautiful. It's like Frozenbyte are saying "Oh, did we make *Trine*? We meant this." The same moderate puzzling challenge, the same characters, the same charm and some problems fixed. ■

"It's more chaotic, more flexible, and more fun"

Well, that filled a gap

Three ways to cross a chasm in *Trine 2*

1 Trunk call of booty
The thief can hang from wooden items with her grappling hook, and thus swing across. But the further into the game you get, the less wood there is. Poor thief.

2 Sword to the kerb
While he's mostly there for fighting, the Knight has other uses. Plants can be chopped away as here, releasing a log that will bridge the gap.

3 Stacking
Later in the game the Wizard can conjur up to four simultaneous items, making challenges like this pretty trivial.

◆ **Expect to pay** £11.99 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Atlus
◆ **Developer** Frozenbyte ◆ **Multiplayer** Up to three, co-op ◆ **Link** trine2.com

VERDICT

Trine 2 is far from mould-breaking, but the edges have all been smoothed and it's lovelier than ever.

PC GAMER **82**

Swings, portals, and sweet sweet physics.

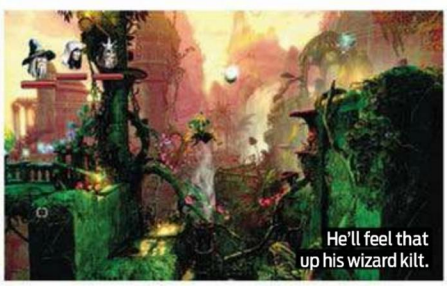
Best use of purple in a forest setting 2011.

Be sure to activate Unlimited mode – it's just better.

Portals transfer air currents as well as people.

Seriously, give the art guys a massive biscuit.

Nothing says fudged solution like four crates.


He'll feel that up his wizard kilt.

REPLICATED

APB RELOADED resurrects the ambitious city MMO as a free-to-play game. Was the operation successful? ***By Rich McCormick***

Need to know

What is it?
Free-to-play, city-based MMO. Play enforcer or criminal, and try to complete missions.

Influenced by
GTA, *World of Warcraft*

Play it on
Core 2 Duo, 4GB RAM, GeForce 8800 or above.

Alternatively
GTA IV: The Ballad of Gay Tony

Copy protection
Online activation, Punkbuster

Not revamped, not rejigged, not redesigned. *Reloaded*. *APB*'s new suffix is apt, as this free-to-play reincarnation of 2010's deflated cops and robbers MMO is a retread of the same ground. The same drab city, the same hollow combat, the same lopsided results.

The original city of San Paro has been left standing, a monument to badly judged level design and the colour grey. The first game's devs, Realtime Worlds, intended the place to live and breathe. Instead, it spluttered a few times before its life support failed. Its resurrection is a miserable one.

Reloaded's missions usually pit two small squads of human-controlled criminals and enforcers against each other, asking them to perform a multi-stage series of mini-jobs. One team has to drive to a place, collect a thing, and deliver it somewhere else. The other team has to stop them. Occasionally this leads to the kind of scenes that flicker through the minds of non-players when you describe *APB* to them: high-speed chases through busy streets, last-second jumps into getaway cars.

"A monument to bad level design and the colour grey"

These *do* happen more regularly than before – little adrenaline shocks to punctuate hours spent bumbling around between jobs. More often, playing *Reloaded*'s missions is like beating your head against one of San Paro's flat, grey concrete walls.

Mission locations are invariably overlooked by high ground. The first team to occupy that ground is the de facto winner, possessing sufficient cover to pop anyone who comes close. Grenades can't flush them out. Well-versed players will simply set up camp in an unassailable location and sit out ten minutes of screaming frustration. San Paro is so full of hiding spots and high ground that it's far easier to put someone else's mission under lockdown than it is to complete your own.

Deals on wheels

Urban renewal doesn't seem to have been high on GamersFirst's list of priorities: *APB* had the same spatial problems, and the same tiresome missions. The new devs have instead focused on the economy. *Reloaded* is free to play, supported by item, modification and vehicle sales, as well as a premium semi-subscription option. Steer clear of the latter and you get obnoxious little reminders telling you what you could've won in XP and in-game currency if you'd stumped up the cash.

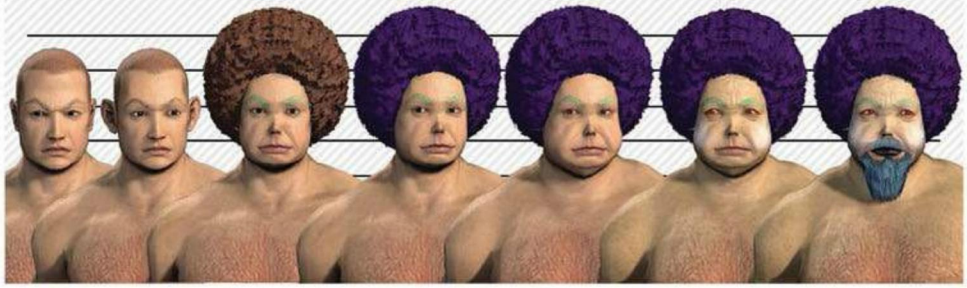
GamersFirst's best work can be seen in the driving, which is much more responsive than before. Players had to apply for planning permission if they wanted to turn in *APB*'s starter car; *Reloaded*'s is nippy and accelerates quickly, losing out only over distance. Top-tier cars clock in at around $15, making their purchase just about reasonable. Better wheels can be earned with repeat play, and are available from mission-giving vendors for in-game cash.

Guns are cheaper – around $5 – and can be loaned for a month at a time. Lifetime access is more expensive, but players wielding chunkier weaponry have a notable bonus over skinflints. Playing with the default Star 556, I was ineffectual even at mid-range, where the weapon is meant to shine. I tried a scoped-up AK47-analogue, and was cutting down enemies in half the time. There's little connection between weapon and world, and still no headshots. Bullet barrages inexplicably kill some players in milliseconds, then it seems to take multiple clips to down others.

Most of *APB*'s problems remain in *Reloaded*. It even inherited a few new ones, as it is currently seeded with cheaters. The original game was arguably killed too soon, so the switch to free-to-play means interested parties should at least take a weekend city break back to San Paro. But this is no revitalisation – *APB Reloaded* is rehash, replication, and repetition. ■

Making a monster

APB's detailed character creator in action. Horrible action.

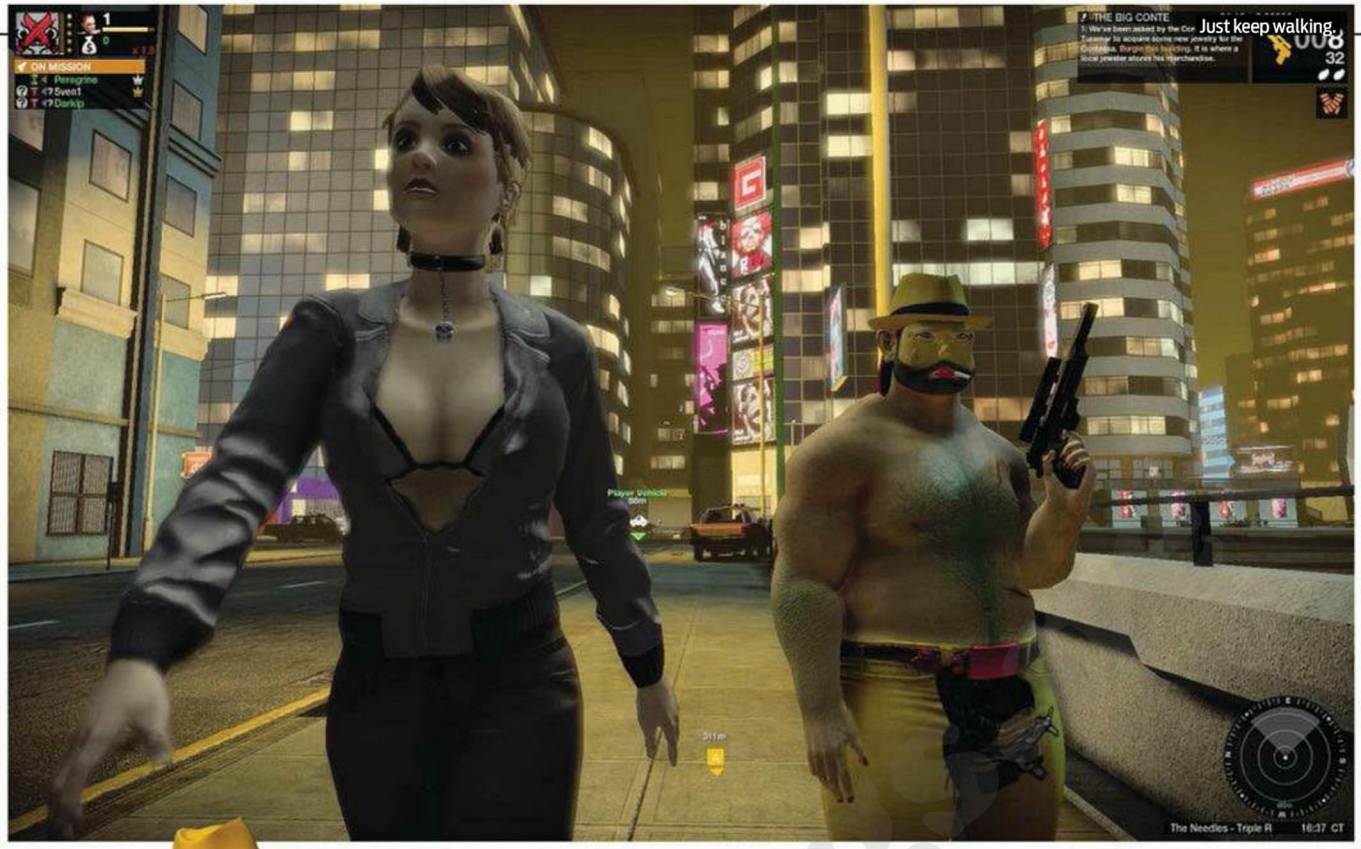


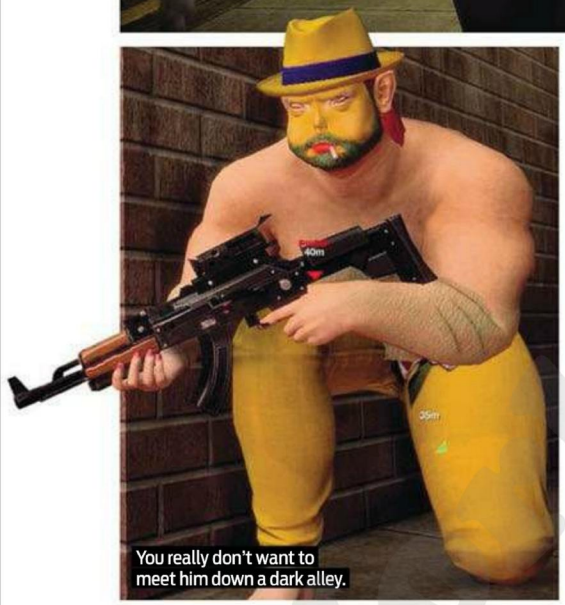
◆ **Expect to pay** Free ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** GamersFirst
◆ **Developer** In-house ◆ **Multiplayer** Massively (ish) ◆ **Link** apbreloaded.gamersfirst.com

VERDICT

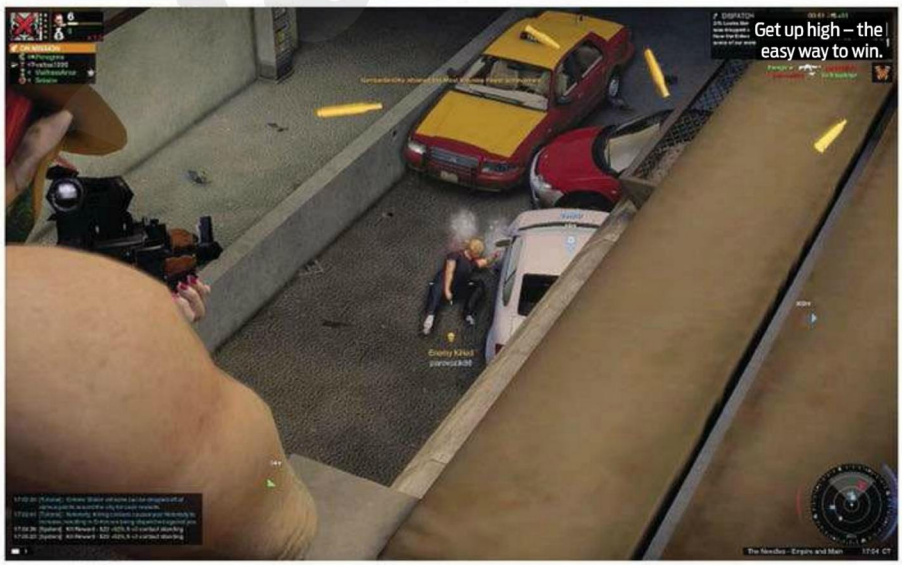
Reloaded has recreated *APB*, but reined-in its ambition, inheriting most of the same problems for a better price.

PC GAMER **57**


Just keep walking.


You really don't want to meet him down a dark alley.

Car chases are *APB* at its most exciting.


Get up high – the easy way to win.

Nonlethal weapons are available.

The hat completes the look.

BACK TO THE FUTURE

BATTLEFIELD 3: BACK TO KARKAND tests how much we'll pay for a slice of the past. ***By Tom Senior***

Need to know

What is it?
Map pack adding four revamped *Battlefield 2* maps, 10 weapons and three vehicles.

Influenced by
Battlefield 2

Play it on
Core 2 Duo CPU, DirectX 10 3D card, 15GB HDD, 2GB RAM

Alternatively
Battlefield Play4Free

Copy protection
Origin

"The maps are fantastic. But then they should be"

The *Back to Karkand* expansion for *Battlefield 3* started a war inside my head. On one side, the cynic. On the other, the boy who likes shooting things. "£12 for four old maps, ten old weapons and a few scrappy vehicles?" The cynic scoffed. "Shut up!" the boy cried. "I just killed a tank by shooting a rocket through a hole in an apartment block!" It's an argument the cynic was never going to win.

The maps are fantastic. But then they should be: Wake Island, Gulf of Oman, Sharqi Peninsula and Strike at Karkand are all *Battlefield 2* maps, rebuilt to work with the graphical power and explodiness of the Frostbite 2 engine. The four-year-old architecture has been tweaked and iterated upon countless times. They're finely honed, fair, and consistently deliver great games.

Strike at Karkand and Sharqi Peninsula provide the most memorable fights. Almost every building can be blown apart. The streets are dominated by rumbling tanks, but the warrens of narrow alleyways let assault fighters take the battle away from the monstrous vehicles. Gulf of Oman is also fantastic: its tall buildings and leering cranes offer some creative vantage points for snipers and it's more densely urban than the *Battlefield 2* original.

Get in the tank!

The slender horseshoe of Wake Island is perhaps the weakest of the bunch, but still delivers a great spectacle. Its wide open walkways and bridges are a nightmare for infantrymen on foot, and its weird shape and increased size makes it hard for fighters on one end to get to the other. It's a great hunting ground for pilots of the F-35, however. The VTOL jet makes a return from *Battlefield 2*. It's much more sluggish than *Battlefield 3*'s jets, but the ability to hover and pick off infantry make it a devastating and satisfying weapon.

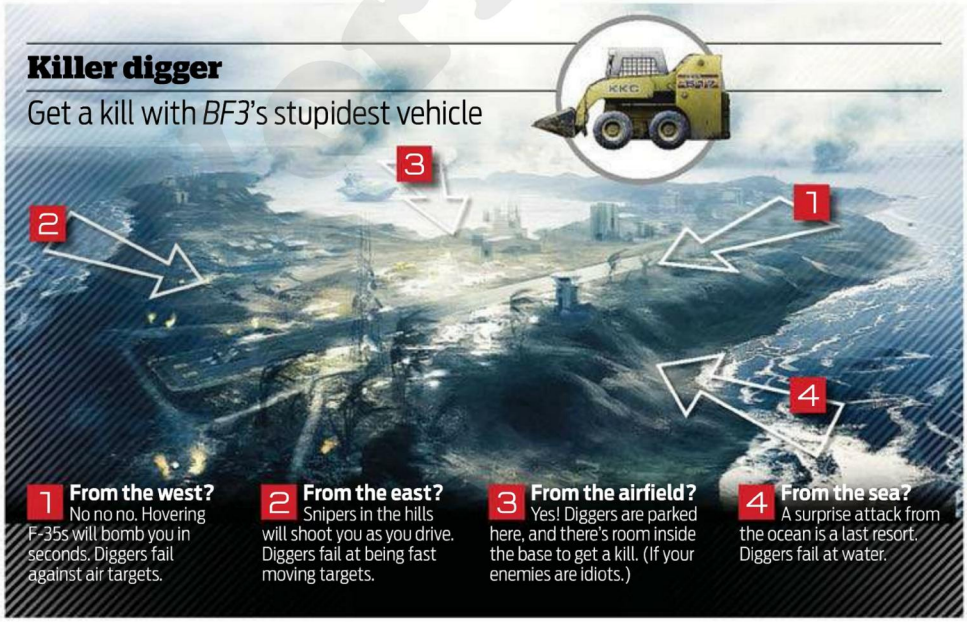
Other returning vehicles include the speedy, vulnerable DPV buggy, the BTR-90 Armoured Personnel Carrier and a new, tiny yellow digger that DICE have added for a laugh: there's an achievement on offer if you somehow manage to run someone over with it. *Back to Karkand* also contains ten weapons, all of which originally appeared in *Battlefield 2*. You can unlock these by completing Assignments, tasks that ask you to rack up a certain number of kills, revives and ammo supplies across the maps.

The maps are top notch, but the £12 pricetag is still troubling. At almost half the price of the base game (which is required to play *Karkand*), we should expect a little more than a few remastered classics. *Bad Company 2*'s Vietnam pack succeeded because it took us into a different place where the weapons were rustier and the warfare dirtier. *Back to Karkand* gives us more *Battlefield 3*, with the same highs and lows (Battlelog is still a nuisance: long load times and regular disconnections). *Back to Karkand* isn't an expansion, it's a good but expensive map pack.

Only two of *Battlefield* 3's original maps delivered the full, sprawling warfare experience of jets flying overhead as tanks duelled below. The four new maps added by *Back to Karkand* show *Battlefield 3* at its biggest and best. It's strange that DICE have had to reach into familiarity to really show what *Battlefield 3* can do, but there's no denying *Back to Karkand*'s quality. ■

Killer digger

Get a kill with *BF3*'s stupidest vehicle



1 From the west? No no no. Hovering F-35s will bomb you in seconds. Diggers fail against air targets.

2 From the east? Snipers in the hills will shoot you as you drive. Diggers fail at being fast moving targets.

3 From the airfield? Yes! Diggers are parked here, and there's room inside the base to get a kill. (If your enemies are idiots.)

4 From the sea? A surprise attack from the ocean is a last resort. Diggers fail at water.

◆ **Expect to pay** £12 ◆ **Release** Out now **Publisher** Electronic Arts
◆ **Developer** DICE ◆ **Multiplayer** 2-64 ◆ **Link** http://bit.ly/ueh5ks

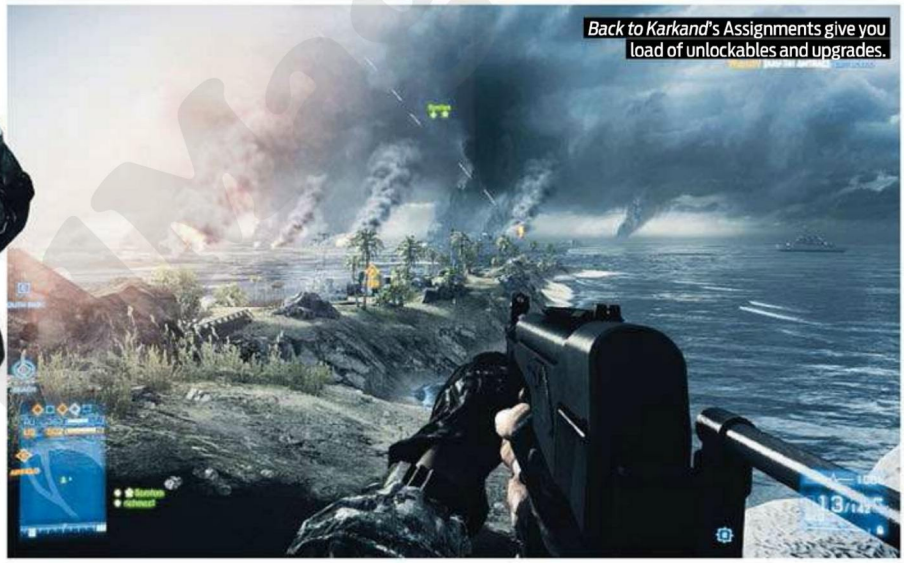
VERDICT

These four fantastic maps are pricey, but they're more than just a nostalgic throwback. They present *Battlefield 3* at its best.

PC GAMER **84**

Back to Karkand introduces ten new weapons and three vehicles, including a fighter jet.

Is this really the time to be practising your Capoeira skills? This is a war!



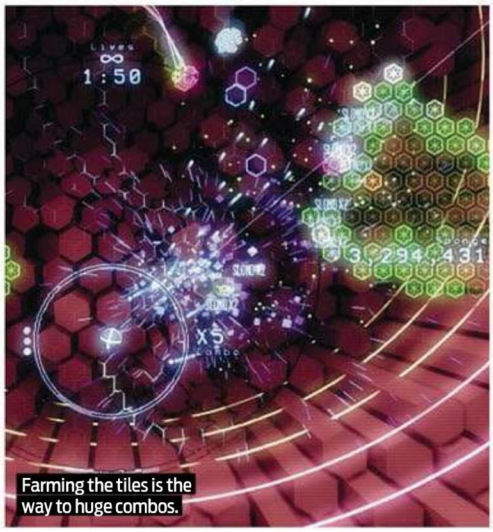
Back to Karkand's Assignments give you load of unlockables and upgrades.

'Enhanced destruction' means you can smash or blow the crap out of nearly anything.

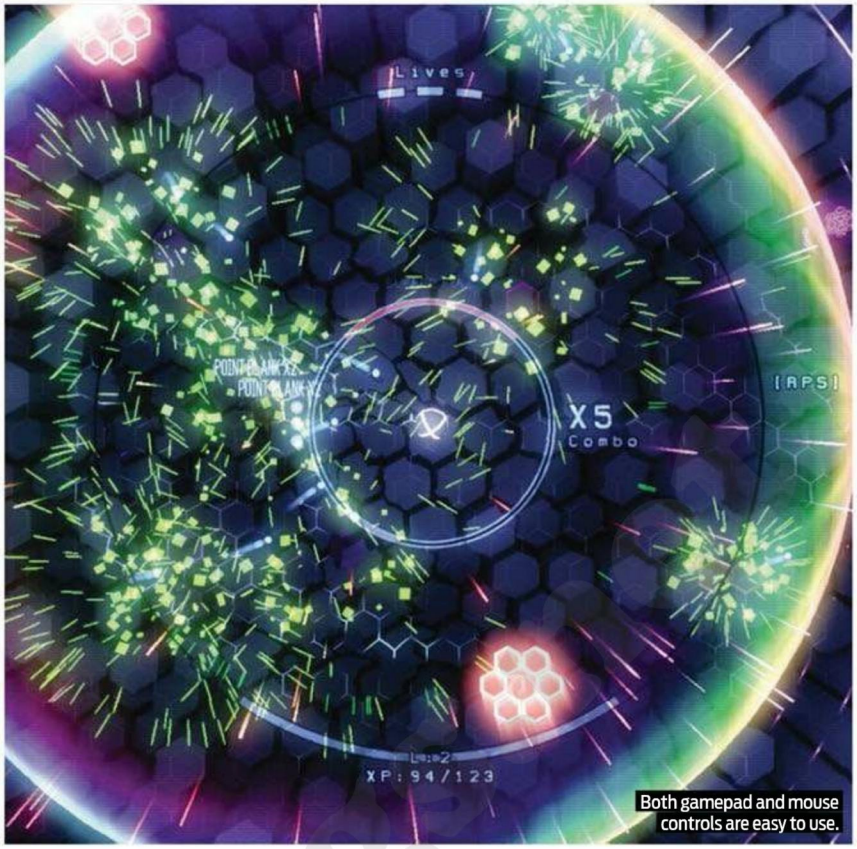
Conquest Assault mode is a 'capture the flag' team game.

The maps were already top notch, but their Frostbite 2 rejig makes them truly awesome.

The squiggly tumours are horribly relentless.



Farming the tiles is the way to huge combos.



Both gamepad and mouse controls are easy to use.

SWELL

There's a familiar feeling rising from something hidden just beneath the **WAVES**. ***By Dan Griliopoulos***

Need to know

What is it?
Techno arena shooter with a sci-fi soundtrack and relentless moreishness.

Influenced by
Acid House, *Geometry Wars*

Play it on
2GHz, 1GB RAM, shader model 3 graphics card

Alternatively
Geometry Wars, 75%

Copy protection
Steam

Taking *Geometry Wars* as your inspiration is a good idea. That tightly-designed arena shooter was in itself a derivation of previous games *Robotron* and *Smash TV*. However, even given that obvious inspiration, *Waves* still improves on its predecessor.

Initial enemies are relatively dumb. They move predictably and die easily. Higher ranked enemies are either harder to hit, more erratic, or block off larger and larger areas of the arena. Layering the different enemy types in mixed combinations adds variety, difficulty and longevity.

Points rack up from a variety of multipliers provided by the slow motion mode and by completing combos. The combo multiplier system seems restrictive – you need to kill three enemies every second to keep the boost rolling – but it rewards and encourages the kind of enemy-farming tactics necessary to get the big points. Two minutes in, there are enough enemies spawning to make maintaining your multiplier possible. And there's a need for chaining together kills beyond leaderboard boasting: each time you achieve a 10x combo, you get access to a very short-lived timeframe to use a bomb. These clear the screen, and are extremely important for buying breathing space as the levels increase in insanity.

So where does it differ from *Geometry Wars*? The advancement curve is smoother and steadier: new players will be able to survive for longer than the few minutes that other game allows, and they'll also find themselves getting better, quickly. Secondly, the player is given explicit control over the slow motion mode. Ration this right and you'll always be able to surf through difficult moments. Finally, there's a small spawning period as each enemy warps in, giving you a chance to move, react and plot before you're overwhelmed by lights and death.

Although *Waves* remains frantic, by giving you vital windows to plan ahead and stocking your toolbox with potential escape routes, you can pick your way through tough moments. Each death is a learning experience, each immolation unpicking something else about the game you'll have a better chance of avoiding next time.

Beyond one survival and two time attack modes, the superb Bombing Run mode is notable for its reliance on a rhythm of pacifist survival. The only way to kill enemies here is by reaching alternate checkpoints, which detonates a screen-wiping bomb. The Challenge mode, which has you meeting very simple targets for maximum points, is solid but more limited in scope, making high scores less of a thrill.

The majority of *Waves*' mechanics may be familiar to players of *Geometry Wars*, but that doesn't invalidate the game's enjoyment or undermine its polish. Even the replication of the genre's ubiquitous Tron-ny aesthetic and chiptune music isn't enough to sink *Waves*. ■

◆ **Expect to pay** £6.99 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Squid in a box ◆ **Developer** In-house ◆ **Multiplayer** No, but leaderboards ◆ **Link** waves.squidinabox.com

VERDICT

There are no hidden depths in *Waves*, but it's worth splashing out on it. (I can't think of any more sea-related puns.)

PC GAMER **81**

GOUGED

Get covered in gore in **DEAD ISLAND: BLOODBATH ARENA**. *By Tom Senior*

The most surprising part of this collection of survival maps is the story wrapped around it. Instead of having the four arenas accessible from the main menu, they're plonked right in the middle of the world, behind a small door deep inside a sewer.

Luckily you can fast travel to the underground hub using the maps on the wall of each safehouse. There you'll find a unit of macho soldiers who have holed up in the middle of the city, fighting to earn as many man points as possible before a zombie snacks on their grey matter.

The four arenas host endless waves of zombies. The easiest map is set in a cramped, rocky niche at the top of a ravine (perfect for kicking zombies into). The middling maps take place in two swamps, one set at night, the other packed with tall grass that hides the approaching hordes. The hardest map takes place in a large multi-level facility. It's the biggest of the lot, but still doesn't feel large enough.

Up to four players can jump into any arena, at any level. Experience points and materials found in the arenas can then be taken out of the hub and back into the story mode, making *Bloodbath* a good way to level fast. It may well bankrupt you, though. The price of repairing your weapon quickly becomes a problem.

Worse is that the survival modes provide the same toe-to-toe zombie fighting you find throughout *Dead Island*. It's the items that dedicated teams will really be playing for. The Sonic Pulse Grenade makes zombie heads explode satisfyingly, but the new environments don't justify the price. Best considered if you're a *Dead Island* fan craving a new challenge. ■

PC GAMER **59**

◆ **Expect to pay** £8 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Deep Silver ◆ **Developer** Techland ◆ **Multiplayer** Up to four players, co-op ◆ **Link** bit.ly/i5Ef12

FALLING DOWN

Ignore **FOR THE AWESOME**'s unprintable title and jump for joy. *By Chris Donalan*

Base jumping used to be nothing more than a stylish means of landing bored millionaires in hospital. Thanks to Dejobaan Games, it's now a slick arcade score rush everyone can enjoy.

Reckless Disregard for Gravity set the tone in 2009, filling a series of abstract skyscraper stacks with points-boosting distractions and self-conscious humour, and then sending you in with nothing but a wingsuit for protection.

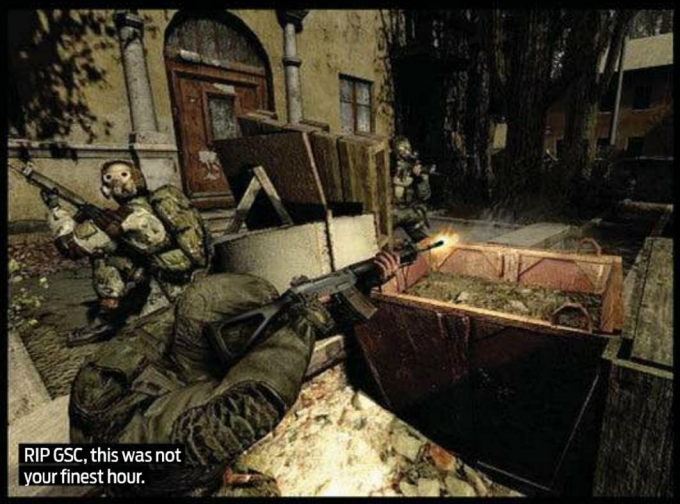
Now, semi-sequel *AaaaaAAaaa AAAaaAAAAaAAAAA!!! for the Awesome* (we'll just call it *Awesome*, eh?) ups the challenge, remastering the original campaign's 80 odd jumps and bringing in 43 more. The wingsuit's faster, the environments are prettier, and the design is a touch meaner, too, with new levels that tempt you to take risks, and dead ends that punish you when you do.

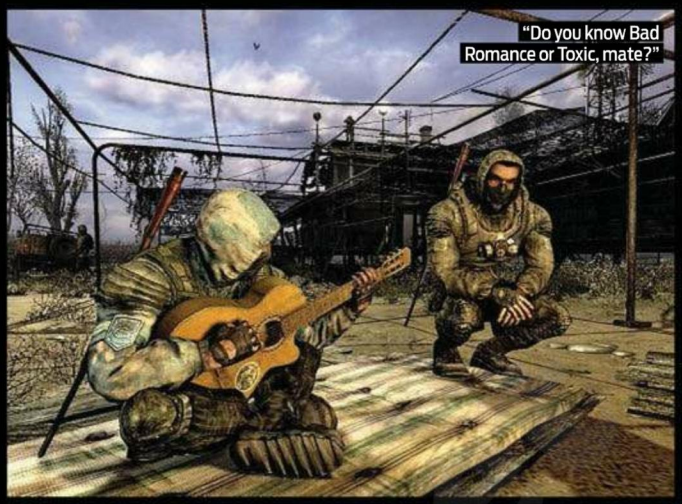
It's the right approach, since this is one of those games that's at its best when it's pushing you to the point where unblinking concentration is threatening to tip into rage. To keep you there, *Awesome*'s smartest levels take their racing lines and tie them in knots, pushing you into the rotating fans of a factory turbine, say, then down past thickets of roving laser beams, and out through an asteroid field. While the original game's gauntlets quickly became formulaic, the new levels are more varied and a little more interesting.

This remains a game with a very narrow focus, however, and it isn't helped by a progression system that sees you grinding old jumps in order to unlock new ones. *Awesome* is still a touch too repetitive for its own good, but that makes it easy to fall for in brief, concentrated bursts. ■

PC GAMER **79**

◆ **Expect to pay** £7 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Dejobaan ◆ **Developer** Dejobaan, Owlchemy Labs ◆ **Multiplayer** No ◆ **Link** www.dejobaan.com/awesome


RIP GSC, this was not your finest hour.


"Do you know Bad Romance or Toxic, mate?"

Aah, but who is the real prisoner?

Those are clouds! You LIED to us.

Not an encouraging tactics blackboard.

CLOUDLESS STRIFE

The weakest link in a well-loved chain, **STALKER: CLEAR SKY** returns to the shelves.

Need to know

What is it?
Open-world high-radiation shooter

Influenced by
Far Cry

Play it on
Pentium 4 2GHz / Athlon 2200+, 128MB video card, 512MB RAM

Alternatively
Far Cry 2, 94%

Hey, it's the open-world nuclear shooter (with RPG elements, mind) that's 75% more pointlessly annoying to type than *F.E.A.R.*! And, if I'm being fair to Monolith, at least *F.E.A.R.* stood for something. *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*'s full title is apparently 'Scavenger, Trespasser, Adventurer, Loner, Killer, Explorer, Robber', which has the suspiciously chewy aftertaste of post-rationalisation about it.

"People keep asking what it means, Alexei." "Why does it have to mean anything, Vlad? Big letters and full stops are top-shelf wicked, and everyone knows it." "Yeah but Eva says she's getting two emails a week. And you know what she's like, she can't admit she doesn't know something. She's started making shit up. She told a seven-year-old it was a contraction of Stalin Wanker." "But that doesn't even make sense of all the full stops." "Tell *her* that."

Clear Sky is the 2008 prequel that was released one year after the unexpected hit original game, and two years before the redemptive sequel, *Call of Pripyat*. *Clear Sky* is the reason that *Call of Pripyat* had something to redeem.

It's set once again in The Zone, a radioactive mutant-strewn egg with Chernobyl as its isotope-shitting yolk. There are a couple of new territories to explore, and your dealings with the factions have been made prominent. The faction war has even got its own tab on your PDA, along with a point-capturing subgame that'll eventually lead to you taking on the enemy HQ.

The intention was to make this war feel organic – like you were having a natural influence in the ongoing rivalry. Sadly, it doesn't come across that way. It's so explicitly game-esque in its point-captureyness, that the big beautiful world snaps out of focus. This is a series that thrives on moments like some guy playing a guitar, not a collection of disconnected battles that only feel like they're happening because you went to a spot on the map. It might as well flash up "GO FACTION BATTLE AREA!!!"

The difficulty level, to put it diplomatically, will please seekers of challenge, masochists and the hopelessly fond of death. The world is even more full of artificial life – doubly so at night – and it's more heavily armed with instakill grenades. There's also a slightly unerring attempt at humour. Know yourself, *Stalker*. Your charm was your bleakness, and no amount of Rastafarian bartenders and lol-along PA announcements will match that.

There's still a sense of what made the original such a needling pleasure. The world is stunning, the swamplands brilliantly designed. While *Clear Sky* was a bit of a lapse, fans of the other games will almost certain wring £5 worth of fun out of it. Especially if you think of yourself as hardcore. In which case, look at you! You big hardcore gamer, you. All big and hardcore like that! Give us a kiss. Give your mum a kiss.

◆ **Expect to pay** £5.10 ◆ **Publisher** Deep Silver ◆ **Developer** GSC Game World
◆ **Multiplayer** Up to 32 ◆ **Link** cs.stalker-game.com ◆ **First review** PCG 192, 68%

VERDICT

Clear Sky never lived up to the standards of its stalky siblings back in the day, but it's finally found a happy price point.

PC GAMER **71**

BLACK MIRROR

Can the **ULTIMA VII COMPLETE COLLECTION** lure us away from *Skyrim*?

It makes my skin crawl when I think that *Skyrim* fits on a £5 flash pen. That's classic Men In Black universe-in-a-marble, is that. But then, there are as many ways of shuffling 59 playing cards as there are atoms in the universe, and *Ultima VII* and its expansion is a fart-sized 28Mb. Nothing makes sense.

U7 kicked off a new trilogy in Richard Garriott's Britannia, with a new engine, mouse controls, and just enough modernity to allow a willing today-brain to fill in the gaps. While it'll be tough for *Skyrim*-sodden newcomers to get a true sense of this game's contemporary impact (although they will be amazed at how easy inventory management is), there's a certain reassurance in the fact you can walk into someone's house while they're in bed, and stare at them. This is where *Elder Scrolls* perverts got their first taste.

As you enter the game world, you discover a murder, and hear of the Fellowship, an organisation so worthy and sweet that even the gruff shopkeeper snaps out of his angry schtick to recite their tenets without so much as a Hmmph. But this is a world where magic-users are going wappy, the Fellowship isn't quite as sweet as it seems, and The Guardian is trying to enter Britannia through the Black Gate. You're going to need to level up, Avatar.

One tiny negative: if any game should make you weepy for the days of 'shops' and 'boxed products', it's this one. The threatening black slab that was the original *Ultima VII* box was a masterpiece of confident understatement. Still, you can always download a jpg of it. ■

PC GAMER **90**

Back when mice were a gaming luxury.

Set thesaurus to 'buxom'.

◆ **Expect to pay** £4 ◆ **Publisher** Good Old Games ◆ **Developer** Origin Systems
◆ **Multiplayer** No ◆ **Link** gog.com ◆ **First review** PCG 13, 91%

Great game, wrong price.

ALIEN VS PREDATOR CLASSIC 2000

This version of the 1999 *AvP* came out in 2010, making the choice of *2000* as a subtitle somewhat arbitrary. Still, 'classic' is fair enough – it's the fantastic and varied FPS that laid the foundation for the equally good Monolith sequel. You can play as an Alien mother protecting her brood, a put-upon marine cowering in the dark with only flares for friends, and a gymnastic eyeball-swapping Predator. It's a bit of a gem, and even the sound design is canny enough in its psychology to leave your scalp tight and your shoulders tense. One problem: it's been on Steam for a year, for £3 at the time of writing, which makes the Sold Out boxed version an essential only if you're obsessed with having stuff on your shelves. ■

PC GAMER **88**

◆ **Expect to pay** £5 ◆ **Publisher** Sold Out
◆ **Developer** Rebellion ◆ **First review** PCG 68, 90%

Three different games at one identical price.

LORDS OF THE REALM TRIPLE PACK

Combining a turn-based world map with real-time battles, the first two *Lords* games were an exercise in keeping loveable peasants happy. In the eight years that followed, there was clearly some kind of identity crisis, and the series sloughed its turn-based shell. No more resource management, and quite frankly the peasants could leap into a cholera pit for all you cared. You'd be far too busy scanning the map like some kind of morbid gardener for battles that needed tending, and wishing you could pause to issue orders. The final game is simple, elegant, and entirely different, which makes this bundle even better value, really, as you get to witness a small but slightly impressive strategy rebirth. ■

PC GAMER **78**

◆ **Expect to pay** £5 ◆ **Publisher** Sold Out
◆ **Developer** Impressions Games ◆ **First review** Various

Hello, I am a fucking thing you can buy.

ANGRY BIRDS

Never lose your exuberance. The world will present you with reams of evidence that you are wrong to trust human behaviour. That people en masse are a doomed, unlearning and uncontrollable mob. They will offer *Angry Birds* as proof. Despite being derivative luck-led shit, it has sold hundreds of millions. There are alarm clocks, plush toys, egg recipe books. But you must keep faith. Sit there, your big smiling chin shiny with the juices of your saliva gland. Launch bird after bird into arbitrary structures, your evolutionary instincts misfiring so heavily you miss your bus stop in a loop of patient restarts. Stay happy, stay stupid. The only thing less fun than *Angry Birds* is hating it this much. ■

PC GAMER **57**

◆ **Expect to pay** $4.95 ◆ **Publisher** Focus ◆ **Developer** Rovio
◆ **link** www.angrybirds.com ◆ **First review** N/A

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Boffins expand flash storage limits

THE BIG STORY Terabyte-sized SSDs possible thanks to new manufacturing technique developed by Intel and Micron

Tiny flash memory modules, capable of storing a terabit of data on a chip smaller than a fingernail, are due next year from manufacturing partners Intel and Micron.

The two companies, who own joint stakes in a company called IM Flash Technologies, showed off the chips which have been built on their new 20nm multilevel-cell (MLC) memory process using a similar high-K technology to the current Sandy Bridge CPUs. They've managed to shrink the manufacturing process down to its smallest size yet, enabling more bits of data to fit into the same size packages.

Each module in the new chips will be capable of storing up to 128Gb, and chips will contain up to eight modules per package. SSDs tend to use 8 or 16 chips for storage, depending on density, which means this breakthrough paves the way for SSDs with a total capacity of a full tera*byte*. As ever, once capacities rise, costs for smaller parts should fall fast.

What will the performance be like? Generally speaking MLC memory isn't as fast as SLC (single level cell) memory – there are more bits stored per individual memory cell in MLC designs, making them harder to read. Reducing the number of chips per drive may also reduce performance. But even if they aren't as quick as current drives, the price per gigabyte should offset this.

At the same time as announcing the 128Gb modules, which will be available sometime around the middle of 2012, Intel and Micron also told the press that their 64Gb modules have gone into mass production. These use the same process as the 128Gb ones and will be available within the next few weeks. ■

Adam Oxford

Many boffins died making this technology.

The new tech will be with us in months.

PERSONAL HUDS FOR ALL

AUGMENT REALITY THE TAC-EYE LT WILL OVERLAY YOUR REALITY

Computer screen glasses makers Vuzix may have cracked the final obstacle to the sci-fi personal data overlay. They've made a pair of glasses with a heads-up display built in, which means we can look forward to the so called 'real world' looking more like a first-person shooter. Called the Tac-Eye LT, the specs are made for military use and have the extra appeal of being bulletproof. **AO**

GEFORCE 560 IS SPECIAL

GRAPHICS SPECIAL EDITION GEFORCE GRAPHICS CARD LAUNCHES

Nvidia have launched a special edition of their popular GTX 560Ti, dubbed somewhat convolutedly the GeForce GTX 560Ti 448 Limited Edition. It has 448 unified shader cores, compared to just 384 on the standard chip, but it's using the same processor as the much more expensive GeForce GTX 570 and 580 ranges. This gives it higher bandwidth and rendering performance, even though it runs at lower clockspeeds than a normal 560Ti. Most of Nvidia's partners have already begun selling the new boards, including Asus, Gigabyte and Zotac. Sadly, the 448 LE is a tad more expensive, costing around £240. Which means the stock 560Ti will be staying in the PC Gamer Rig for the time being. **AO**

HOT PRODUCTS

MEASURING HARDWARE FEVER

Wireless storage
Portable Wi-Fi hard drives from Seagate and Kingston.

Thermaltake Overseer RX-I
Terrifyingly huge case that's spiked all over.

3D printing
Next year's big thing, apparently.

Razer Battlefield 3 kit
A Black Widow and Imperator with decals. Should outlast the game.

Amazon Kindle Fire
Not the iPad killer you're looking for.

Dell XPS 14z
Could have been world's best laptop. Is not.

Glasses free 3D
Still no sign of those lenticular laptops. Wonder why?

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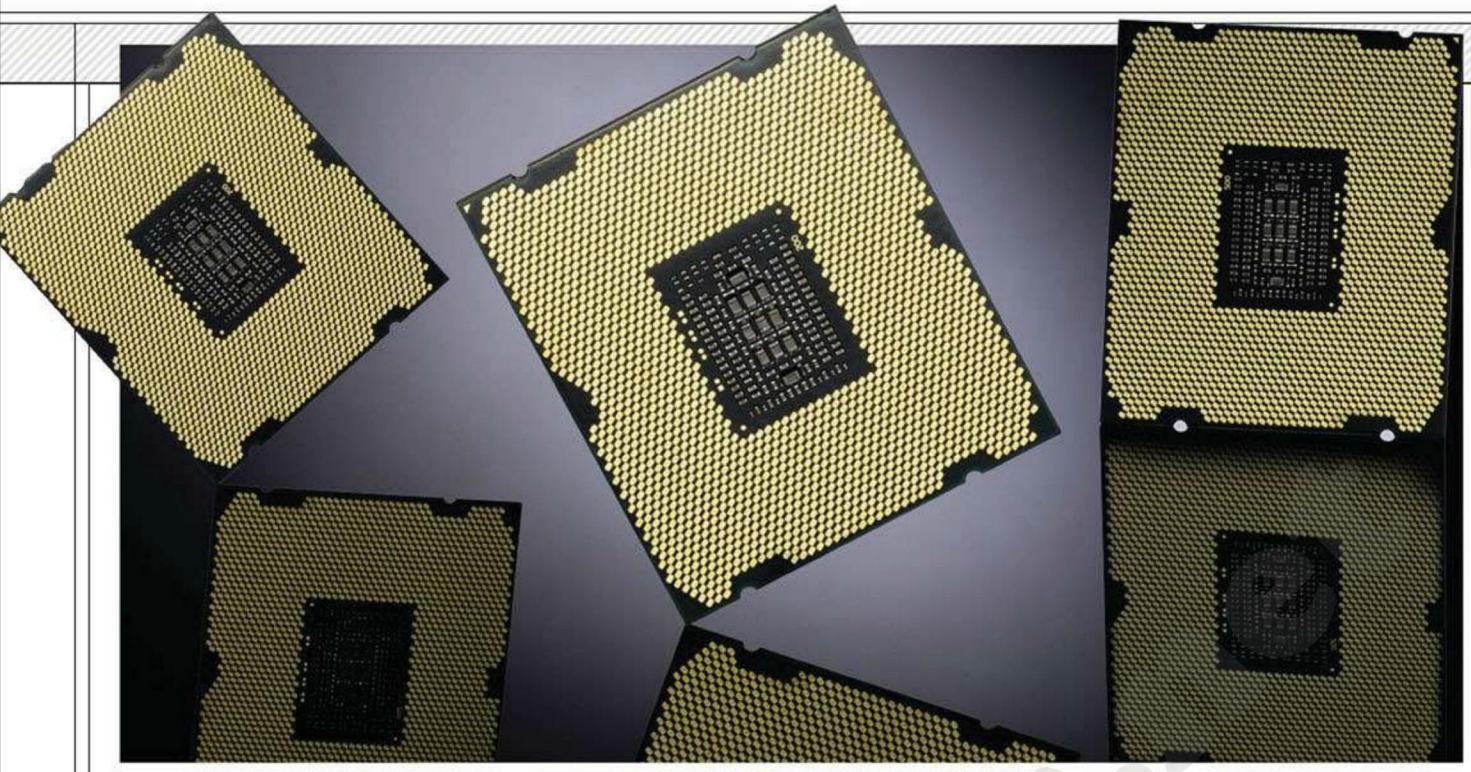

Meet Intel's new wallet-crushing CPU

Intel's Sandy Bridge E 2011 pin processor has arrived just in time for 2012. But it might just prove a little painful for the pocket.

You don't need Intel's latest flagship processor, the Sandy Bridge E. For gaming purposes, spending more than £150 on a CPU is overkill. I can appreciate the argument that buying a £250 Core i7 over a £150 Core i5 is futureproofing and getting the best PC you can, but the Sandy Bridge E can cost up to an eye-watering £840. It's the computing equivalent of buying a Hummer for the half-mile school run.

With that out of the way, we can focus on the important questions. Like is it any good, and might you want it if you've got an enormous amount of money to spend? It's certainly a monstrous piece of kit. It has nearly double the number of transistors as the Gulftown Core i7s it replaces, such as the Core i7 980X, and requires an entirely new motherboard chipset with 2011 pins in its CPU socket. By comparison, Gulftown required a 1366 pin socket.

There are three Sandy Bridge E processors, recognisable by their '3' prefix. The Core i7 3930K (3.2GHz) and Core i7 3960X (3.3GHz) are both six-core processors, the key difference between the two being that the cheaper (£480) i7 3930K has 12MB of onboard cache while the flagship 3960X has 15MB.

The third processor is a quad core i7 3820, for which prices haven't been confirmed at the time of going to press. Architecturally, though, there's little fundamentally different between the Core i7 3xxx and other Sandy Bridge processors, such as the socket 1155 Core i7 and Core i5s. It has the same second generation Turbo Boost technology which will overclock the 3960X to 3.9GHz if only a couple of cores are utilised, and SSE4.2 instruction set and hyperthreading to double the number of simultaneous threads that can be operated upon. The big changes are the addition of a 40 lane PCI Express 3.0-compatible controller on the chip for multiple graphics support and a quad core memory controller for an absurd amount of memory bandwidth, only really required for the most intense server applications.

"At up to £840, it's the computing equivalent of buying a Hummer for the half-mile school run"

Controversially, Sandy Bridge E doesn't have the built-in graphics of other Intel processors. No loss for gaming, but the QuickSync video encoding function of some of the other Sandy Bridges is a stand-out feature for a lot of people.

Fortunately, unlike in my Hummer analogy, Intel are very interested in energy efficiency. The biggest customers for their chips and data centres spend more money on electricity than anything else. Several companies are working on ways to capitalise on the pressing need to reduce power consumption in the data centre using what are just souped-up mobile phone chips based on ARM cores. If you run a Core i7 3960X flat out at 100% using a synthetic benchmark like Prime95, it's a gas guzzler and will dim the lights. But thanks to drastically improved power gating inside the chip while it's idling, it uses less power than the previous generation Core i5 750.

When it comes to performance, though, Sandy Bridge E is unbeatable – and both the six-core variants are highly overclockable too, with unlocked multipliers that make it easy to get to 5GHz with a reasonably good cooler. The problem is that not many games (and especially not *Skyrim*) will make use of its six cores.

So no, you really don't need one of these chips. And if you're planning an upgrade soon I'd advise holding off until Ivy Bridge processors appear next year. That said, however, there are some amazingly good deals available at the moment for pre-built systems with Sandy Bridge E chips in. Cyberpower, for example, is selling Sandy Bridge E PCs for less than £1,300, which is a bargain way to get hold of one. ■

Adam Oxford

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What is SSD caching?

Solid state drives are small but fast. Here's how to use one to speed up your whole system

What's better than fitting a small but expensive solid state drive (SSD) that can accelerate Windows boot times and a few choice games across your system? How about a smaller but very cheap SSD that speeds *everything* up?

While SSDs are considered the upgrade of choice for the discerning gamer, it's easy to see them as something of a luxury purchase. They don't tend to accelerate the hard stats that we judge PCs by, like gaming framerates or Cinebench performance. What they do is make boot times faster and speed up level load times, along with other nebulous and hard-to-measure concepts like the responsiveness of your desktop and recovery from standby.

All of which are desirable, but if you're struggling to get *Battlefield 3* or *Skyrim* running with the graphics options maxed out, an SSD isn't going to help you, whereas a good graphics card will.

What SSDs do provide is very fast read times for data access. As CPUs get faster, there is a much higher chance that any bottleneck on system performance is going to be the rate at which data can be found and accessed from the hard drive for processing.

"SSD fast read speeds make boot times faster and speed up level load times"

It's rare for RAM to be the cause of slow down: now that memory controllers are built onto the CPU die itself, there's a huge amount of bandwidth for pulling things out of system memory and very little to be gained by upgrading to faster RAM – it's further down the chain that problems arise.

Adam says
If upgrading now, buying a Z68 motherboard and a drive for SRT is the only logical thing to do. Without a motherboard upgrade, though, you'd be better off forgetting about caching for the moment and manually setting up a new SSD instead.

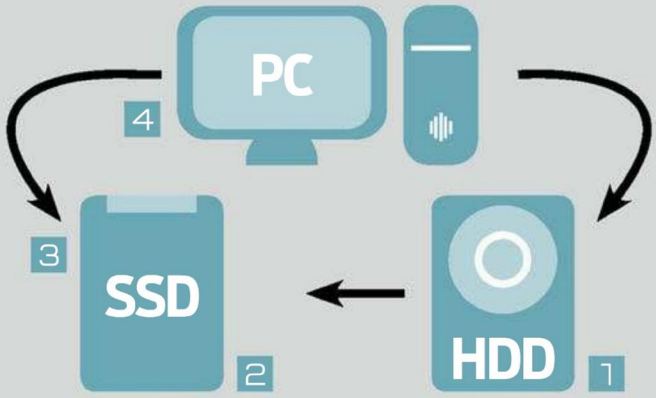
Here's the thing about SSDs: I've yet to see a forum post in which someone says they bought one and it was a waste of money. On the contrary, it's very easy to find anecdotes about it being the best thing that a user has installed.

The problem with SSDs is that they aren't very big, and they are very expensive. Even allowing for the fact that traditional hard drive costs have rocketed recently due to production shortages and natural disasters (some major hard drive manufacturers had factories in Thailand), a 240GB SSD still costs more than ten times that of a 2TB hard drive when compared gigabyte for gigabyte.

So the compromise we make is to choose a smaller SSD that can hold Windows and a few important games, and then to painstakingly move files around so that the games we no longer play as much are moved off onto the slower HDD to make room for the new ones that we want

HOW DOES SSD CACHING WORK?

The pros and cons of caching considered



1. Traditional hard drive
Spinning hard drives offer bulk storage and fast write speeds, so data is saved here from system RAM. In any system – using SSD caching or manually moving files – a hard drive is always going to be essential.

2. Auto transfer to SSD
As games are loaded, the caching software looks for the most regularly accessed files and copies them to the solid state drive, which has much quicker read speeds than traditional hard drives, accelerating data transfer by up to a factor of five.

3. SSD prioritises most-used data
Performance can be patchy though: on the first run of any application, data will be loaded from the slower bulk storage drive, and games that don't get used often might get bumped from the SSD to save space.

4. It's all about convenience
Using the SSD as a cache is the most convenient option. If you install the SSD as a regular hard drive, you'll need to stay in control of where games are installed and which folders Windows chooses for large files like videos and music.

performing at their best. There is, however, a better way: use the SSD as a cache drive. That means letting software algorithms work out which files you access most often, and automatically move them to the SSD for more rapid access. In some cases, caching will be done below even the file structure level, so bits of large files will be transferred over rather than the whole lot.

It's efficient, in terms of space, since the software might decide that just 300MB of a 6GB Windows installation needs to be on the SSD, and likewise only a small fraction of that 200GB Steam folder actually needs to be ready for action at any time. Even better, if you start to use one game more than another, files get intelligently shuffled around to make the best use of space.

There are a couple of downsides: the first is that you lose the ability to use the SSD as a regular hard drive. It won't appear in Windows Explorer for copying files directly to it, and you have no control over what gets cached. The other problem is that, as it stands at the moment, you'll need very specific hardware combinations to make use of current caching technology – and all of them require a reinstallation of Windows. And they all require Windows too, so dual booters need not apply.

The simplest option is to use a motherboard with Intel's Z68 chipset, which has caching built in: Intel's Smart Response Technology (SRT) provides everything you will need on the installation disc. At the moment, SRT is by far the most cost-effective and reliable way of caching, and Intel even manufactures 20GB SSDs specifically designed to perform well as a cache.

You can set up SRT to work at its fastest possible settings, or in a slightly slower but much safer 'enhanced mode'. In the case of the former, cached files are not mirrored on the hard drive, so if the SSD does fail your system will probably become unbootable.

Alternatives to SRT include IcyDock's SSD Xpander, a drive cage that accepts one traditional drive and a 2.5in SSD and pairs them using a built-in RAID controller. All you need to do is attach the cage to a SATA port and install the drivers, and the Xpander will start copying files over as required. The problem with the Xpander is that because it's limited to SATA II speeds, and runs both drives over one motherboard cable, it is quite a bit slower than SRT, which supports SATA III (6GBps) transfers.

"Intel make 20GB SSDs specifically designed to perform well as a cache"

Finally, there's the all-in-one option. OCZ's new RevoDrive Hybrid (reviewed last issue) has a hard drive and an SSD mounted on a PCI Express card. It's potentially the fastest of the lot, with transfer speeds of nearly 1GBps compared with around 600MBps for the fastest SATA SSDs, but the drivers proved temperamental in our tests and frequently prevented Windows from booting. At over £400 for a 1TB hard drive, it's also a lot more expensive than going for an SRT option.

Seagate's solid state hybrid drive, Momentous XT, is slightly slower (since it uses SATA rather than PCI-Express) but costs a lot less. This has just been relaunched with a new 8GB cache SSD and a 750GB traditional hard drive. It has other advantages too: it's designed for laptops, so it's a 2.5in drive but it still has full-speed 720RPM platters compared with the 5400RPM ones of the RevoDrive Hybrid. And it works with any operating system. We'll be reviewing the Momentous XT next issue.

SSD caching is clearly the future: short of extraordinary events that drive up the price of traditional hard drives (like the recent floods in Thailand, see PCG 235 for more) it's going to be many years – and probably never – before solid state drives are as cheap as spinning ones. By the time they are, all our storage will probably be in the cloud anyway. So if you want the best performance now and for the next few years, spend your cash on a nice big cache. ■

Adam Oxford

SPEED TEST

Read speeds for cached data compared:

Traditional hard drive **120MBps**

SATA 3 SSD cache drive **400-600MBps**

IcyDock SSD Xpander **375MBps**

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BUYER'S ADVICE

HEATSINKS

Building a PC? Make cooling a key consideration. ***By Adam Oxford***

DICTIONARY

Coolant> 'Water cooling' is a misnomer, since tap water would simply silt up a cooling system, go stagnant and smell. Chemicals are usually added to prevent parts from corroding or perishing while improving conductivity.

Resistor> A lot of heatsinks now seem to be shipping with an optional inline resistor to slow the fan speed down, rather than a variable speed switch or knob.

Peltier cooling> The Peltier effect is when two metals are placed together so that warming one side causes the other to cool down. It isn't especially effective to directly cool a CPU, but is effective as part of a water-cooled system.

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One of the curiosities of Intel's new Sandy Bridge E-series chips is that the retail box doesn't include a heatsink. Traditionally, a CPU is sold in two different ways: one is for consumer use and has everything you need in the box, including thermal paste and a heatsink; the other is for system builders and just has a chip. Intel aren't supplying a heatsink to go with the new Core i7s.

That's not a massive problem, since there are loads of third-party heatsinks that don't cost a fortune. But it does serve to remind us that even lower-end processors, which have perfectly adequate stock coolers included, can benefit from upgrading the 'sink to one that's larger, quieter and more efficient. If you're overclocking, it's essential.

What's a heatsink?

It's the large metal unit on top of your CPU, which is designed to draw warmth away from the chip and disperse it into the rest of the case. In a well-designed PC there's an internal airflow that takes this heat and blows it out the back.

Why do I need one?

Computer chips generate heat as electrons flow through their silicon pathways. Unfortunately, heat also upsets the movement of said electrons, causing errors in calculations or causing the chip to cease functioning altogether. The harder a chip works, the hotter it gets, and yet the hotter it gets the slower it will run so the harder it has to work. See the irony there?

Can I damage my CPU by not using a heatsink?

It is possible, and certainly running your processor hotter than is recommended (anything over 80°C for a CPU is a cause for concern) for a long period of time will shorten its lifespan.

But it's hard to burn out a CPU these days: modern chips have temperature sensors and will shut themselves down before any real damage is done.

How do heatsinks work?

The base, or 'block', of a heatsink is made from a highly conductive material (usually copper), which is clamped tightly to the top of your CPU. Thermal paste is used to fill in any microscopic air pockets that might prevent heat transferring from the CPU to the heatsink base. Running through this block are a series of heatpipes, which take the heat away from the CPU and transfer it to radiator fins, which are then cooled by a fan.

Heatpipes?

These are ingenious sealed pipes made from copper or aluminium and filled with smaller capillary tubes containing liquid. As the part of the heatpipe closest to the CPU heats up, natural convection moves the warm liquid away to the radiator fins and pulls cold fluid back down.

What's water cooling?

This is when coolant is actively pumped through the CPU block and away to a separate – and usually larger – radiator which is cooled by bigger fans. For really extreme overclocking, the liquid in a watercooled system can be properly chilled using some sort of portable compressor or Peltier cooler. It's safe to use, but beware of leakages.

Can I make my current heatsink quieter?

If noise is a problem, chances are that your current CPU cooler can be made quiet enough that its hum is drowned out by the sound of your graphics cards and PSU. In your BIOS settings you'll find lots of options for controlling fan speeds – you can manually set a maximum speed or use a setting called 'QFan' if you have it to vastly reduce the amount of noise your heatsink makes. Failing that, you could fit an external fan controller, which isn't just practical but also (I think) looks rather attractive.

Do I need to upgrade my stock cooler?

Maybe. The stock coolers that come with other Sandy Bridge CPUs are tiny, almost silent and support a bit of overclocking. But they're certainly not the best option available, and since a high-power heatsink can cost you less than £20 these days, you might even do it for purely cosmetic reasons. Who are we to judge? ■

GROUP TEST

HEATSINKS

Completely silent or wet and wild? Which should you trust to keep your CPU cool? ***By Adam Oxford***

HOW WE TESTED

Cooling performance > Our test setup used a Core i7 2600K and the Prime95 application to run all four cores at 100% for ten minutes. Temperatures were measured at idle and under stress, and a note made of how long it took to return to 30°C after the application was stopped.

Noise > This was measured with a handheld decibel meter held next to the top of the motherboard. Without a sound proofed room it's not a completely accurate method, but it's good for comparison.

Price & design > A stock cooler is virtually free, so spending a lot on an upgrade may not make sense. More important is how easy it is to fit and whether it'll stay put once attached.

Comparisons to Intel's stock cooler > The stock cooler kept our chip at 26 degrees during idle, but a high 86 degrees under load. Noise went from 37dB idle to 42dB at full tilt.

Trinity

£35 Thermolab

Choosing the right cooler is tricky. Unless you're planning to overclock your CPU to exceptionally high frequencies, your main considerations are probably going to be price and noise. Spending £70 to get an extra 1/3 performance from a £200 processor makes financial sense, but it's not usually necessary for good in-game frame rates. If you've got a recent Intel or AMD CPU and simply want it to do its job at stock speeds as quietly as possible, the Thermolab Trinity is exactly the kind of cooler you need.

"The quietest cooler on test, as discrete-sounding as it is ordinary to look at"

It's not exciting to look at, and the plain tower of fins is only distinguished from a hundred other coolers by the black panel on the top and a generally high build quality. The bulk of the Trinity is pure aluminium, with four copper heatpipes wrapping around through the CPU block and drawing heat away from the CPU.

The 130mm fan is removable, although it comes prefitted on rubber mounts which reduce vibration noise to almost nothing. Even with the CPU running at its hottest, I measured just 3dB difference between this and the completely silent Nofan 'sink on the next page. That makes it the quietest cooler on test, as discrete sounding as it is ordinary to look at.

More impressive, though, is that fact that without any really fancy features or even an LED behind the fan, the Trinity cools almost as well as the liquid filled Antec Kühler opposite. It's not quite the best pure air cooler on test in terms of temperatures achieved, but it is in the top tier, and more than adequate for moderately high overclocks, too.

The only real drawback to the Trinity is that it's quite fiddly to fit. Many Z68 and P67 motherboards have fairly large passive heatsinks on the voltage regulation modules (VRMs) that are usually cited between the CPU socket and the rear I/O ports. The Trinity has a set of bolts that have to be tightened by hand that sit right next to these, which almost certainly means you'll be skinning your knuckles on the cooling tower.

It does, however, win bonus marks for being the only cooler in this test that came with more screws and washers than you actually need to fit it. As anyone whose hunted on hands and knees looking for a tiny grub screw that's escaped off the end of a screwdriver will appreciate, that alone is almost enough to get it a gold star. ■

VERDICT

A solid, well-priced and virtually inaudible cooler with a universal appeal that's far more interesting it looks.

PC GAMER **88**

Spec ◆ **Socket support** 1366, 1155/1156, 775, AM3/2+/2 ◆ **Materials** Aluminium, copper ◆ **Fan** 130mm ◆ **Grease supplied** Yes, tube ◆ **Dimensions** 150x136x85mm ◆ **Weight** 735g ◆ **Noise** 35dB ◆ **Time to 30 degrees** 8 seconds

Kühler H20 920

£76 Antec

Once upon a time, water cooling involved fitting tanks to drive bays, drilling holes in your case and plumbing in tubes with jubilee clips by hand. Coolant levels had to be carefully monitored and topped up regularly. It was a job best left to the pros.

Now, the majority of water coolers look like Antec's Kühler H20 920. It's a self-contained system with a simple CPU block attached to a radiator, which in turn fits on the back of your PC where the rear system fan should be. The water pump is built into the CPU block, and the system is prefilled with coolant, then sealed shut at the factory. It's a lot cheaper than a system full of separates, and while it doesn't have the Bioshock-y appeal of turning the inside of your PC into a cybernetic fish tank, it's effective for cooling your chips.

The 920 is one of the more expensive sealed system coolers, and comes with two fans for cooling the radiator where most have one. The really unusual thing, though, is that there's a USB cable that attaches to a header on your motherboard and lets you control the water flow and fan speed from within Windows. It's a bit gimmicky, since the automatic mode is usually the best compromise between performance and noise anyway, but should appeal to those who want to be able to control everything in their PC.

It's tricky to fit, since you have to manipulate both CPU block and radiator together while wielding a screwdriver. It's not helped by the fact that the thermal grease is pre-applied to the CPU block, making it easy to accidentally scrape off, and also has terribly written instructions with unclear diagrams.

Once you've got it into position, though, the 920 really is quite special. By far the most effective heatsink here, it kept temperatures below any of the air coolers, and was barely a whisper louder than even the Trinity opposite. The only metric it didn't do so well on was bringing the chip temperature back down after benchmarking, presumably as a result of latent heat in the coolant.

Fight through the set-up problems and it's the overall winner if you want to overclock and can stomach the price. For value, though, it can't match the Trinity. ■

VERDICT

All the best reasons to invest in a water cooler: highly efficient and almost silent, with the best cooling on test.

PC GAMER **87**

Spec ◆ **Socket support** 1366, 1155/1156, 775, AM3/2+/2 ◆ **Materials** Aluminium, Copper, Rubber, Plastic ◆ **Fan** 2x120mm ◆ **Grease supplied** Preapplied ◆ **Dimensions** 151x120x59mm (radiator) ◆ **Weight** 700g ◆ **Noise** 37dB ◆ **Time to 30 degrees** 30 seconds

Frio Advanced

£40 Thermaltake

One thing that has struck us about all of the coolers tested is how little difference there is between noise levels when the CPU is idling, and after ten minutes at 100% load. Unlike the stock Intel cooler, all of the seven sinks kept the CPU below the temperature threshold for triggering a fan speed increase, even at maximum usage – which is why it's a shame that the giant Thermaltake Frio Advanced doesn't come with a fan controller, or at least a cable to run both of its fans off of the CPU fan connector on the motherboard. Without buying extra parts, each fan connects to a different header on the motherboard, meaning only one can be adjusted automatically to CPU temperature. For the other, you'll have to manually balance it in the BIOS.

It's frustrating, because without a throttle the Frio is one of the louder coolers on test. It isn't the loudest, but it could become grating if you're gaming while someone else in the room is trying to watch TV, for example. And when it comes to cooling power, for most CPUs there's little to be gained by choosing the outlandishly large Frio Advanced over the Trinity, even if this is marginally easier to fit – especially when you consider this weighs nearly a kilo.

Where the Frio comes into its own, however, is with chips that run very hot. As well as being a good choice for overclocking a socket 1155 Core i5 or i7, it also supports AMD's Bulldozer chips and the new 2011 Sandy Bridge Es from Intel.

It's a very efficient choice too: maximum temperatures under load were kept down low and our test chip returned to 30 degrees in just five seconds from its peak. It's not quite as chilly as the similarly priced Zalman CPNS 12X tested overleaf, but it is noticeably cheaper. The Frio is one to bear in mind if you're planning a fairly big overclock, but don't want to spend a fortune on the Kühler above. ■

VERDICT

Big and brash, but you'll need a separate fan controller to get the most from the Frio Advanced.

PC GAMER **83**

Spec ◆ **Socket support** 2011, 1366, 1155/1156, 775, FM1, AM3/2+/2 ◆ **Materials** Aluminium, Copper ◆ **Fan** 2x120mm ◆ **Grease supplied** Yes, tube ◆ **Dimensions** 130.6x122x159.2mm ◆ **Weight** 954g ◆ **Noise** 43dB ◆ **Time to 30 degrees** 5 seconds

Fenrir Siberia Edition

£50 Titan

When chips run as cool as they do now, can you really justify a heatsink as bonkers as this? It's essentially two heatsinks held together by an extravagant array of copper heatpipes, which looks and feels far too delicate to even support its own weight, let alone the two fans that you'll need to attach.

Fitting the Fenrir Siberia is unsurprisingly difficult. Each fan has four easy-to-lose washers for dampening sound, and metal clips that are hard to get into place. Worse still, the first time I tried testing it, a washer next to the motherboard was out of place and shorted the connection between CPU and memory slots, throwing up a fatal boot error during POST. Fortunately though, no long term damage was done.

I was impressed, however, by the fact that it didn't interfere with the top PCI-Express slot once in place. You won't be able to use RAM with a fancy heatspreader, though, since there's not a lot of clearance between the fourth DDR3 slot and the radiator that overhangs it. Titan argues that this can help with overclocking, since the downward pointing fan cools components below it. I'm not convinced that it's better than lateral airflows throughout the case going in one direction, though.

Still, it is quirky looking, and if you've got a windowed case and friends that appreciate the shine of a copper heatpipe, you can't fault its performance. The Zalman below has the edge on its ability to keep the heat down, but the Fenrir is very quiet. All that surface area for heat dissipation means the fans can be kept down to the level of barely audible, even under extreme load. One CPU core never rose above 53 degrees, for example, and it was an equal winner for reducing the temperature of a CPU going back into idle.

A very efficient cooler, then, and possessed of a unique sense of style at a not outrageous price. But definitely not for everyone. ■

VERDICT

Offers unusual looks and good performance, but the size and difficulty fitting the Fenrir count against it.

PC GAMER **79**

Spec ◆ **Socket support** 1366, 1155/1156, 775, AM3/2+/2 ◆ **Materials** Aluminium, copper ◆ **Fan** 120mm + 140mm ◆ **Grease supplied** Yes, tube ◆ **Dimensions** 200x130x162mm ◆ **Noise** 38dB ◆ **Time to 30 degrees** 5 seconds

CPNS 12X

£70 Zalman

The trademark flower shape of Zalman's high end coolers is one I've always found highly appealing. Part jet turbine, part zen garden flora, it's big and striking without being gaudy, like many competing high-end components.

This particular revision to the design is comprised of six heatpipes and three fans. Curiously, where older CPNS models came with variable speed throttles that could be manually adjusted, this has a single fixed resistor that can be fitted inline on the power cable, or removed altogether.

For this test, the CPNS 12X was left in quiet mode, with the optional resistor in place. It's unfortunate, then, that even cheating the BIOS setting to slow the fans down further left it the loudest cooler in the test by a considerable degree. Fine if you prefer to game wearing headphones. More than likely a little distracting if you don't.

The 12X, however, is clearly not designed for casual use, and comes into its own when coping with extreme pressure. Designed to work with Sandy Bridge E chips, it's only slightly less efficient than the water cooled Antec Kühler at dispersing the highest temperatures. Our CPU peaked at 53°C – quite the achievement for an air cooler.

The problem, however, remains that the Kühler is only £6 more expensive, more efficient and quieter. There seems little reason to invest in an air cooler that's bigger, doesn't perform as well and costs nearly the same. If you want a Zalman flower, seek out one of its cheaper siblings. ■

VERDICT

While it's the best looker on test, and works well with a Sandy Bridge E, it's not as good as a watercooled unit.

PC GAMER **65**

Spec ◆ **Socket support** 2011, 1366, 1155/1156, 775, FM1, AM3/2+/2 ◆ **Materials** Copper, Nickel, Aluminium ◆ **Fan** 3x120mm LED ◆ **Grease supplied** Yes, tube ◆ **Dimensions** 151x132x154mm ◆ **Weight** 1000g ◆ **Noise** 46dB ◆ **Time to 30 degrees** 8 seconds

CR-95C IcePipe

£100 Nofan

The holy grail of silent cooling is to do away with fans altogether. And even though when that happens, you're left with a heatsink that's the size and shape of a football trophy rather than a computer component. It's a worthy thing to behold.

Never has a part been more appropriately named, either. Nofan has, indeed, no fans. Yet it works, in the PC Gamer test rig at least. During this rigorous workout it was able to stop a Core i7 2600K from melting down during a long gaming stress test. Temperatures topped out at around 80°C, which is more than we'd like, but not critically bad per se.

According to Nofan's marketing blurb, it uses an entirely new kind of heatpipe – that it steadfastly refuses to go into detail about. But the important thing is that it works.

It's a work of art, and in the right PC absolutely genius, but I wouldn't recommend it for general use – largely because a cooler like the Thermolab Trinity only costs a third of what this does and is far better at its job while still being – for all intents and purposes – inaudible over the noise of graphics card fans and power supplies. If you've silenced your other components, though, then why not? ■

PC GAMER 80

Spec ◆ **Socket support** 1155/56, 775, FM1, AM3, AM2+/2 ◆ **Materials** Aluminium ◆ **Fan** N/A ◆ **Grease supplied** Yes, tube ◆ **Dimensions** 180x180x148mm ◆ **Weight** 730g ◆ **Noise** 32dB ◆ **Time to 30 degrees** 5 minutes 30 seconds

Tranquillo Rev 2

£26 Gelid

Looking for efficient cooling on a budget? Gelid's latest Tranquillo revision wouldn't be my first choice for even the smallest overclock, but for £25 it is quite the bargain.

Like the Thermolab Trinity, it's one of the less inspiring designs in this round up, but it does prove why the standard tower arrangement of heatpipes and fins is so popular.

For most purposes, the performance of the Tranquillo is perfectly adequate. It kept an idling chip down to a reasonable 26 °C, and was only just a smudge louder than the winners in this test. It's a bit tricky to fit, and some of the mountings seem to have been deliberately placed where they're hardest to make sense of. But once it's in place it works.

If you are planning to try overclocking, it's absolutely worth spending a bit more on a more efficient design. The Tranquilo isn't as good at getting rid of high temperatures as its competitors, and I wouldn't recommend it for a socket 1366 chip, even though there's a mount included.

But it's quieter and cooler than the Intel stock cooler for a socket 1155 Core i7, and definitely worth a look if you're on a budget. ■

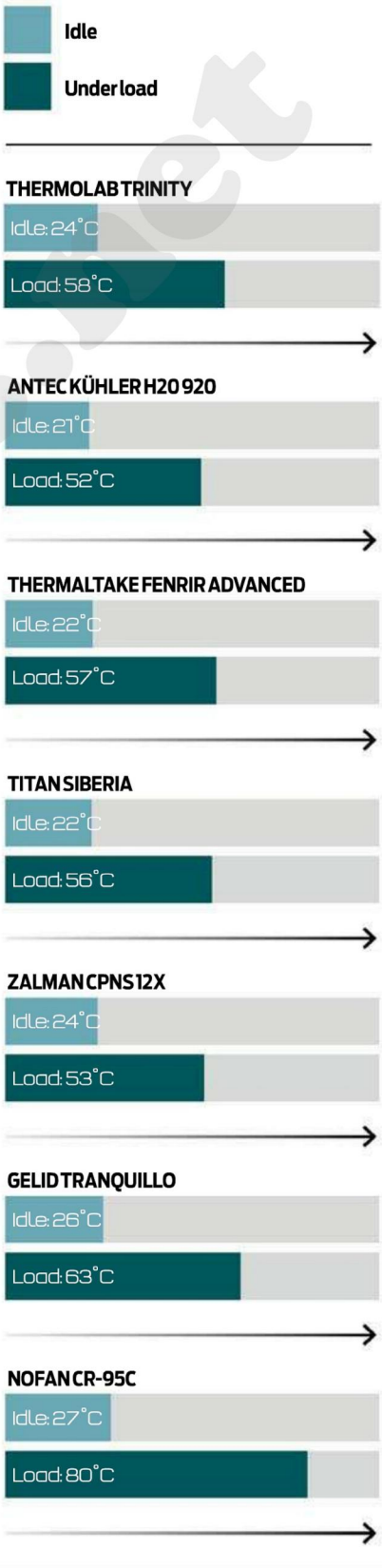
PC GAMER 73

Spec ◆ **Socket support** 1366, 1155/56, 775, AM3, AM2/2+, 754, 939, 940 ◆ **Materials** Copper, Aluminium ◆ **Fan** 120mm ◆ **Grease supplied** Yes, tube ◆ **Dimensions** 153x125x74mm ◆ **Weight** 645g ◆ **Noise** 37dB ◆ **Time to 30 degrees** 35 seconds

BENCHMARKS

WHICH COOLER RAN THE COLDEST?

Coolers tested on a Core i7 2600K, idling and working flat out.



ON TEST

REVIEW

The very best in PC gaming hardware, reviewed and rated. ***By Adam Oxford***

TESTING CRITERIA

Components and materials > A piece of kit is quite literally the sum of its parts. We look for the fastest chips, the highest core counts and the most modern materials.

Real-world performance> Each piece of kit we look at must be examined on its own merits. If it's a mouse, how does it feel? Is it too heavy or light? If it's a memory stick, an item designed for portability, how much data can it hold? Does it read and write data quickly?

Attractiveness> Some kit looks good, some looks bad. Aesthetics are often taken into account as, depending on the item, it can be a factor in your long-term satisfaction.

Value> It may be the highest-performing piece of kit in its category, but is it within reach of most consumers? We like to see components that are not only best-in-class, but offer value for money too.

700Z5A

£1,000 Samsung

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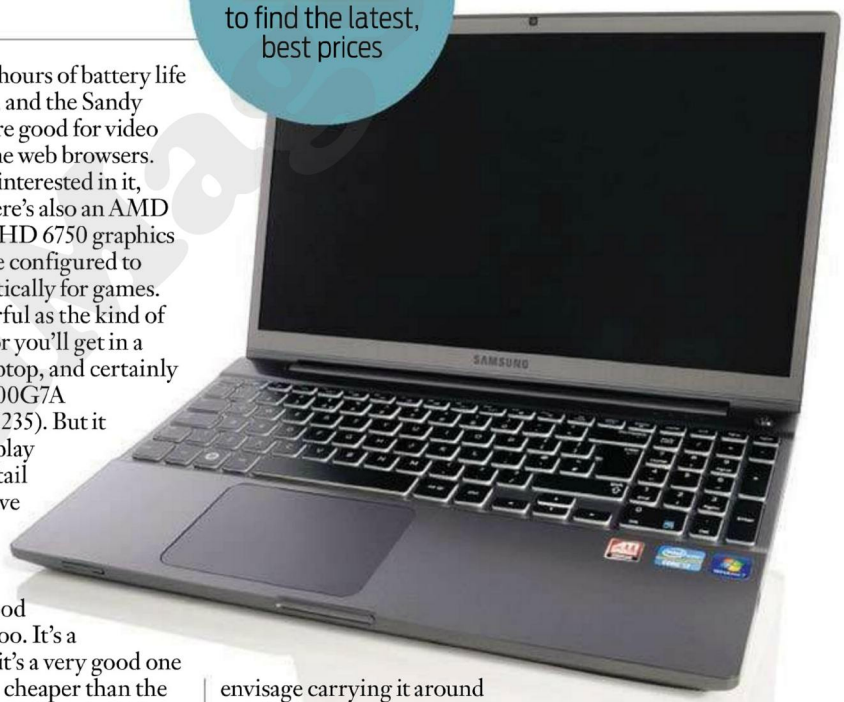

What do you want from your laptop? Should it be as powerful as a desktop PC, capable of driving multiple monitors at high framerates and hang the amount of extra weight the enormous graphics cooler brings? Or do you want a true portable that may not be the best games machine, but is a decent all-rounder that won't cause long-term damage to your shoulder?

Samsung's latest series 7 notebook is a good example of the latter. Very thin for a 15in machine, it's both portable and practical, with plenty of screen space for working and gaming,

"It's both portable and practical, with plenty of screen space for working and gaming"

but an overall depth and weight that beats even an equivalent MacBook Pro. The keyboard is well built and backlit, and there's a large, smooth mousepad that definitely ranks among the best I've seen.

The case is has an aluminium lid with a plastic wrist rest and base, but it feels anything but cheap. Inside there's a quad-core Core i7 (many laptop Core i7 CPUs are dual core) with hyperthreading and Turbo Boost features, as well as hybrid Intel HD 3000 graphics on-die. Running in normal desktop mode, you'll get around five or six hours of battery life from the 700Z5A, and the Sandy Bridge graphics are good for video encoding and some web browsers. The reason we're interested in it, though, is that there's also an AMD Mobility Radeon HD 6750 graphics chip, which can be configured to switch on automatically for games.

It's not as powerful as the kind of graphics processor you'll get in a £1,500 gaming laptop, and certainly no match for its 700G7A stablemate (PCG 235). But it will comfortably play *Skyrim* at high detail settings in its native resolution, and get *Battlefield 3* up and running in a reasonably good looking manner too. It's a compromise, but it's a very good one – and nearly £600 cheaper than the equivalent MacBook Pro. And if you're not gaming, it's inaudible too.

The Samsung also has a nifty little 8GB SSD hidden away for caching purposes, meaning it can boot to the desktop in under 20 seconds, and will accelerate game loading times automatically too.

There are a few downsides: the screen isn't especially high quality and at 1600x900 pixels it's not very high resolution either. At least it has a matte finish, though, so you can see it in a brightly lit office.

If you're after a laptop that is going to be your primary PC and you don't envisage carrying it around much, then you can get more powerful machines for the same price; by the same token, if it's an super-portable that you're after, the featherlight ASUS Zenbook has to be number one choice.

But for a general purpose laptop that can hold its own whether it's running Microsoft Access or *Arkham City*, the 700Z5A is nigh-on unbeatable. ■

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE ★★★★★

SPEC ◆ Screen size 5.6" ◆ **Resolution** 1600x900 ◆ **CPU** Intel Core i7 2670QM ◆ **RAM** 8GB ◆ **Graphics** Intel HD Graphics 3000 + Radeon HD6750M ◆ **Storage** 750GB+8GB ◆ **Dimensions** 362.1x238.5x23.9mm, 2.29kg

VERDICT

While this is not a blisteringly fast games machine, it's very close to being the perfect all-rounder.

PC GAMER **90**

Flatron IPS225V

£115 LG

Remember when IPS monitors were ludicrously expensive, often costing more than the PC itself? Not any more. LG is following up its IPS-on-a-budget 23in IPS236V, which has been the star of the PC Gamer Rig for some months now, with an even cheaper 21.5in panel.

It has the huge viewing angles and rich colours common to all IPS screens, but costs just a slice over £100. This is because LG invented the technology that enables this kind of quality at this price.

To make it even better it has an LED backlight, so it's barely thicker than the magazine you're holding, and sucks up just 30W of power.

There are a couple of catches: there are just six bits of information per channel rather than the eight you'll find in top-end IPS screens, so there's a slightly reduced colour gamut. The second is that the stand is a little bit rubbish, and the design is functional rather than fancy.

Neither of these niggles really detract from the 225V, though. Image-wise it's better than any rival TN or VA panel you might have tried – bright and colourful, with rich blacks and dazzling whites. And as for the stand... well, at least it's stable.

The only reason not to buy it then is size – you can get the 24in version for £30 more, although I'd argue that this has better picture quality. Either way, it's a great monitor at a hugely competitive price. ■

PC GAMER **88**

SPEC ◆ **Screen size** 21.5" ◆ **Resolution** 1920x1080 ◆ **Brightness** 250cd/m² ◆ **Contrast ratio** 1000:1 ◆ **Screen tech** LED eIPS ◆ **Inputs** VGA, HDMI, DVI-D ◆ **Dimensions** 513.2x398.4x191mm ◆ **Weight** 3.7Kg

G4me PC320

£82 Sennheiser

The spiritual successor to Sennheiser's much loved PC161 headset, the new PC320 is designed specifically for gaming with a tough but light design that feels almost weightless after a couple of minutes on your head.

The ear cuffs are extraordinary: big enough to take in the whole ear, yet kept far enough away from your lobes that there's no danger of getting hot and sweaty beneath them. The left cuff pivots to drop a rigid boom mic in front of your face, while the panel on the back of the right cuff rotates to serve as a volume control.

Part of that light weight and cool ear comfort is down to them being open backed, with vents in the rear plates that allow air in (along with background noise). They also allow sound to seep out, of course, so they would be a bad choice if you game in the same room as someone who's watching telly or sleeping.

Open back headsets tend to have a very light and natural sound, thanks to the fact that the diaphragm can move more freely and soundwaves aren't reflected off the rear of the ear piece.

It's surprising, then, that the PC320s have a slightly 'heavier' soundscape than some of Sennheiser's more expensive cans, and aren't as richly rounded as they could be. Music, more than games, sounds a bit like everything is cramped together in the mid-tones.

You can spend not a lot more for significantly smoother sounds: the PC 350 is £20 more or, if you don't need the mic, get the superb Audio Technica ATH-T500 for £30 less. ■

PC GAMER **84**

SPEC ◆ **Weight** 244g ◆ **Frequency response** 15-23,000Hz ◆ **Impedance** 320hms ◆ **SPL** 113dB ◆ **Mic** Unidirectional ◆ **Sensitivity** 38dBV

KIT FILTER

Three MiFi £50

We may not have 4G broadband yet but you don't have to settle for sub-par speeds. Three's MiFi mobile router is a pocket-sized WiFi access point that supports 21.6Mbps download speeds via HSPA+, which Three says will be supported on 80% of its network by next year. You won't be playing *Battlefield 3* via HSPA+ as the latency is too high, but for a lot of MMOs it's very playable. *www.three.co.uk*

88

Black Widow Stealth Extreme Edition £120

Razer's Black Widow is a fine keyboard but noisy, so the Stealth Edition got quieter Cherry MX Brown keys. This Stealth Ultimate Edition is identical to the Stealth but with backlit keys. The result is a great keyboard but it's still far from silent and, compared with the forthcoming K60 from Corsair, pricey too. *www.razerzone.com*

86

Vengeance 1500 £80

The Vengeance 1500's 50mm stereo drivers deliver sound quality that's up there with some of the best for both music and games. The large, padded closed back cans are also comfortable to wear, even if they do get a bit warm. This is one of the better sounding USB headsets and reasonably priced, but my preference would be for a high-end sound card and Corsair's cheaper analogue HS1A. *www.corsair.com*

82

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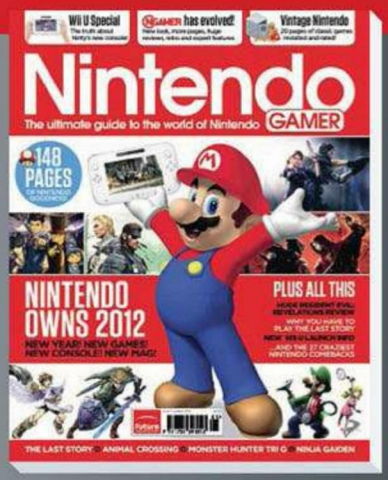

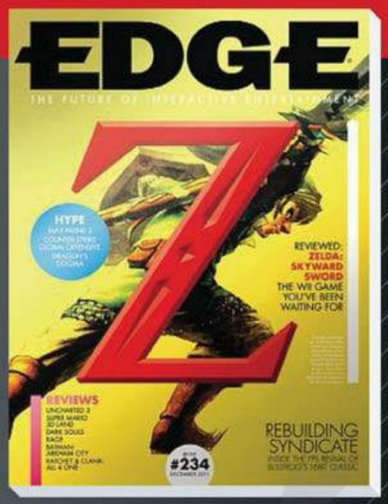

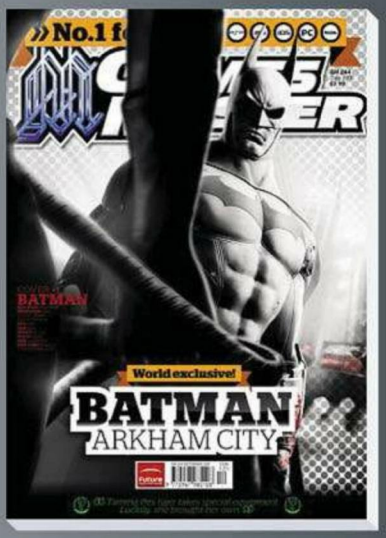

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The PC Gamer Rig

Our averagely priced PC gets a new look, but has the same great value.

Every month I set out with a thousand pounds of PC Gamer's money and work out the best way to spend it in order to put together a new PC for gaming today. Since I always have change left over, it's a shame the money is only pretend money and I can't really spend it.

Nevertheless, the PC Gamer Rig it creates is very real. Updated every issue to represent the kind of machine we consider the 'standard' for gaming, it's carefully designed to offer the very best value for money while also being fully capable of playing any game you can think of.

In the absence of any groundbreaking new graphics cards or processors to shake up the innards of our PC for the average gamer, this month it has a sharp new set of threads to be seen around town in.

While we all wait for something interesting to happen to the price of components (which won't take too long, hopefully), it's out with the perfectly serviceable Bitfenix Shinobi case that the Rig was housed in last month, and in with the Cooler Master 80+, a case that's entirely more 'interesting', if you like that sort of thing.

Adam

Adam Oxford
Hardware Editor

Total price
£840

THE PC GAMER RIG

CPU — £155
Intel Core i5 2500K

An unlocked Sandy Bridge quad core, with everything but hyperthreading included.

FITTED November

3D CARD — £153
GeForce GTX 560Ti

A good low cost card that'll get you gaming at decent framerates on a single monitor.

FITTED January

MOTHERBOARD — £80
Gigabyte Z68AP-D3

An awesome Z68 board, with mSATA connectors for mini SSDs and Intel's caching technology.

FITTED November

POWER SUPPLY — £70
Cooler Master 80+

A decent 650W PSU that's rated well for efficiency. The minimum you should try to get away with.

FITTED November

RAM — £42
Crucial Ballistic Sport

Eight gigabytes of fast 1600MHz DDR3 for under £50. Grab it quick, just in case it's a misprint.

FITTED November

MONITOR — £142
LG IPS236V

Astonishingly low price for an IPS screen, and the LED backlight means it hardly takes up any space.

FITTED November

CASE — £53
Cooler Master 80+

Very spacious inside and just the right combination of killer looks and discretion outside.

FITTED February

KEYBOARD — £25
Microsoft SideWinder X4

Backlighting, macros and anti-ghosting all for a mere £25? That'll do nicely.

FITTED Christmas

HARD DRIVE — £39
Samsung Spinpoint F3 500GB

Hard drive prices are out of control. Get a small one now and upgrade later.

FITTED January

MOUSE — £30
Logitech G400

Classic Logitech style in a brand new design, this 3600dpi mouse is comfortable and precise.

FITTED November

DVD DRIVE — £17
LG GH22NP21

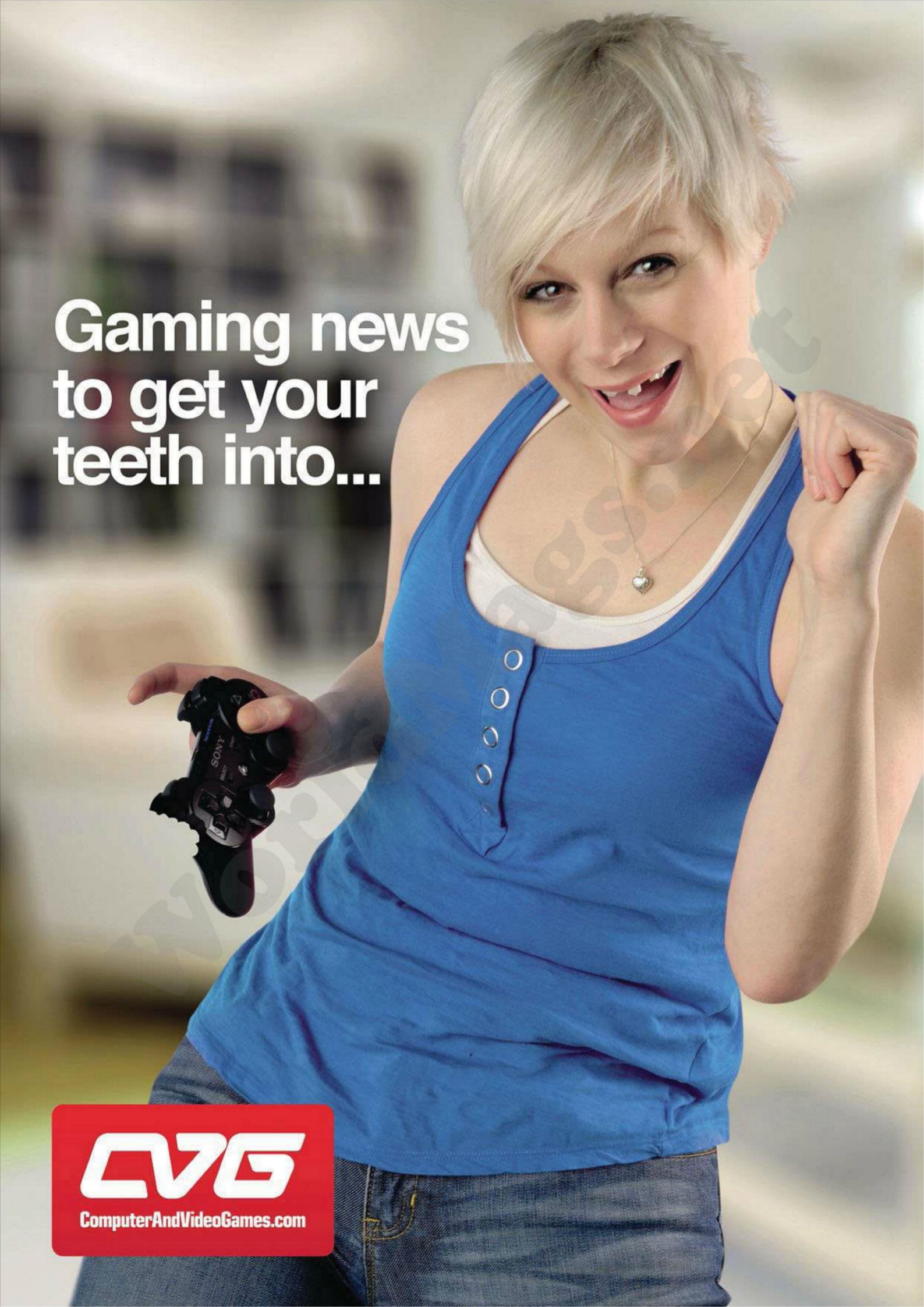
Fast DVD writers are pretty generic these days, and it's not really worth spending the extra for Blu-ray.

FITTED November

HEADSET — £34
Corsair HS1A

Good quality sound at a reasonable price. Easily one of the best sub-£50 headsets.

FITTED November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NOW PLAYING

I could eat him.

THE PC GAMER TEAM

RICH

HENRY

TOM F

CHRIS

TOM H

"I was getting notes of summer, sugar and FORTIFY BLOCK"

EATING THE FORBIDDEN MEAT IN **SKYRIM**. TASTES SLIGHTLY OF... MEAT

Rich McCormick

Now Playing: *Skyrim*
This month: Ate his way through a horrible sack of ingredients. Is now qualified to host Tamriel's Masterchef.
Also Played: *FIFA 12*

Bear Grylls has nothing on me. When Bear Grylls goes out in the snow, he takes state of the art waterproofs, crampons and a camera crew. When I'm tramping around Skyrim's northern coast, I wear a werewolf skin gilet and glass shoes. When it gets too dark for Bear Grylls to see, he goes back to his hotel. When it gets too dark for me to see, I stand motionless for *seven hours*, staring straight ahead.

When Bear Grylls is hungry, he catches fish out of specially bored snowholes with fibreglass rods and cooks them on a campfire. When I'm hungry, I put my hand in my pack and eat whatever I pull out. That was how I started eating people.

Skyrim's alchemy system asks players to combine ingredients based on their stat-altering properties. The best way to find their properties is by eating them. My beardy Breton was on an ice floe to the north of Winterhold when I decided to taste a few of the more exotic ingredients I'd picked up on my travels. Imagine '90s semi-celebrity wine-taster Jilly Goolden, except six-and-a-half feet tall, covered in hair and blood, and backed up by a monstrous ice-beast.

I chewed some garlic first. Not bad, but a bit pungent. I moved on to honeycomb. This was better, I was getting sweet notes of summer, sugar and FORTIFY BLOCK. A handful of snowberries were slightly tart, but bursting with both flavour and a general feeling of fire resistance. Histcarp had a lovely fresh fish taste and the ability to breathe underwater, sashimied with a side of aim-enhancing juniper. I munched on River Betties and Cyrodiilic Spadetails, wheat and whitecap mushrooms. I started to get careless, cramming anything and everything alchemical into my gullet.

Daedra heart. Bit chewy, but it's got to be full of iron. Iron's good for you, right? The statistics bore me out: daedra hearts 'RESTORE HEALTH'. Sure, they also cause 'FEAR', but what's a few minutes of panic

> **"I put my hand in my pack and eat whatever comes out. That was how I started eating people."**

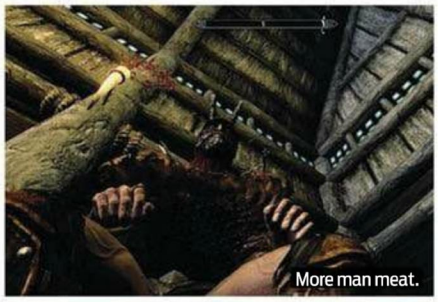
compared to OH GOD WAS THAT A BEAR?

I kept clicking. Sabrecat tooth. Swallowed with only minor blood loss. A handful of pearls. Just call me Johnny Oysters. Spider egg. Wait, I don't want them hatching inside me. Vampire dust. I should stop now. A set of fully grown elk antlers. I'm going to need a running start.

Human flesh.

I clicked once, and immediately froze. My character did the same, staring silently out to the similarly frozen sea.

READ ME
RELEASED November 11, 2011
OUR REVIEW PCG 235, 95%
BUY IT £30, play.com
MORE elderscrolls.com


More man meat.

Don't want to eat him, though.

Overwhelming urge to sneeze.

Just sit back and watch.

Somewhere in my imagination, a gob of man-muscle was worming its way down my character's oesophagus. Bits of person were caught between his teeth. I had stood in front of him, guiding foodstuffs into his mouth like a demented parent. Open wide for the bee thorax! Here comes the ectoplasm aeroplane! Eat this human flesh! My careless clicking had made my man a cannibal.

I continued to stand stock still, expecting to be overcome by a wave of revulsion. Instead, I got minuscule decreases in my red health bar, increases in my blue magicka bar, and a heightened desire to creep around in peoples' houses. I checked the forbidden meat's effects. Damages health, restores magicka, fortifies sneak, and – wait a second – paralysis. Paralysis is one of *Skyrim*'s most useful abilities. Once applied, you can smash away at enemies as they roll around on the floor like toppled statues. Few of the game's alchemical items bestow this property, and this meat was only the second guaranteed source I'd found.

I'd had my first taste of human flesh. Up at the top of the world, I resolved to get more. I needed it, after all, for my experiments.

I bet Bear Grylls has never done this.

Phelps' jokes aren't funny, but people laugh anyway to make him feel better.

"There's an invoice for a pig in the trunk of the car"

THE CONS MAKE LIFE CONVENIENT IN **L.A. NOIRE**

Henry Winchester

Now Playing: *LA Noire*
This month: Solved the harrowing murder of a pig. Harrowingly obvious, that is.
Also Played: *Batman: Arkham City, Limbo*

Conveniently, a suspicious vehicle has been found in a parking lot of the P.E. Freight depot. This means I don't have any problems finding somewhere to park.

The criminals of *LA Noire* are a considerate bunch, always committing crimes in the most accessible, open places. Maybe they could do a murder near the shops so I can pick up some groceries.

Someone's attempted to reupholster the suspicious vehicle with what appears to be a lot of blood, and there's an invoice for a pig in the trunk of the car. One of two things could have happened. Maybe the pig was driving the car and had a horrific accident, which would be inevitable if you were a pig trying to drive a car. Steering wheels and pedals really aren't designed for trotters, and a pig's roadsense probably isn't all that good, unless you encouraged them to learn the highway code with a series of truffles as rewards. The other option is that someone killed the pig in the car..

"IT WAS A PIG THAT WAS MURDERED IN THE CAR! IT'S SOME KIND OF COVER UP! PROBABLY A MAN TRYING TO RUN AWAY FROM HIS WIFE!" I shout at the monitor. I look for this option in my notebook when I'm talking to people, but it's not there. I look at the little Bakelite triangles that criminals leave near important evidence – another thing they do that makes my life a lot easier. They're only one step away from handing themselves in.

I visit a man's wife, then his friend, and find out that the man's gone missing. I find him at his girlfriend's apartment – he hadn't done a very good job of going missing. Turns out he was running away from his wife, and the pig was murdered in the car as a cover up. Who'd have guessed?

READ ME
RELEASED November 2011
OUR REVIEW PCG 235, 63%
BUY IT £35
MORE bit.ly/lanoirepcg

The finest in 1940s carboat technology.

A lot of crimes seem to happen on garage forecourts.

Spelunky: an endless maze of adorable sprites and horrible death.

"A twelve-foot-tall mummy breathes locusts into my face"

WHY **SPELUNKY** IS STILL SURPRISING TOM ON PLAYTHROUGH 1,749.

Tom Francis

Now Playing: *Spelunky*
This month: Found a secret level by dumb luck.
Also Played: *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim, Faster Than Light, Trine 2, Dota 2*

Spelunky is a platformer with randomised levels. Creator Derek Yu is working on a prettier Xbox version that may also come to the PC some day, but I'm still playing the free original. It's my coffee-break game, my netbook game, my 'I really want to play something right now but I don't have time to play anything' game. I also think it's the future of games, or at least a large part of it.

I've played over a thousand games of *Spelunky*, so I know roughly what I'm doing. But I still have no idea what level one is like, because it changes every time. So I leap into it with a weird mix of bravado and caution: dealing with enemies and traps quickly, but edging into the next area pixel by pixel to spot what's ahead.

I arrive in the jungle world without the Udjat Eye. It's the only thing that can detect the secret location of the black market here, the lost door to which could be buried under any one of these thousands of – oh, there it is. Found it by accident with my first bomb.

Inside, among the many shops, is the holy grail of *Spelunky*. No, not the Ankh of Resurrection – that only has power over life and death. The *jetpack*. I have 28,350 gold. It costs 28,000.

It's brilliant. I am soaring over frogs, bouncing off bats, scooting past spike traps. The jungle world is never easy, but I get through it with only a few scraps. Below that, the cave world is all sheer drops and hard-to-reach islands of floating rock. Hard to reach without a jetpack. Whee!

I scoop up two more damsels on my way through the caverns, so I'm almost at full health when I reach the final world. A tribesman sees me, jumps off his ledge, picks me up and throws me into the wall, catches me, throws me into it again, and I fall down in front of a twelve-foot-tall mummy that breathes locusts into my face, killing me. Ah, I remember World 4.

> **"The lost door could be buried under any one of these thousands of – oh, there it is"**

I've probably used all the items in *Spelunky*, seen all the enemies, certainly completed each of the worlds. But I'm still playing it regularly, years later, just because random generation makes each time feel unique. It's one of the only games I play that takes full advantage of the medium, releasing a little authorship to let the timeless nature of gaming reconfigure the experience again and again. *Minecraft* is the other.

READ ME
RELEASED December 2008
OUR REVIEW Not reviewed
BUY IT Free
MORE www.spelunkyworld.com

"My aggressive bounty-building hasn't gone unnoticed"

LEARNING THE PRICE OF FRIENDSHIP IN **SINS OF A SOLAR EMPIRE**

Chris Thursten

Now Playing: *Sins of a Solar Empire*
This month: Realised that a *Solar Empire* is for life, not just for lunchtime.
Also Played: *Skyrim*

Waiting for the pirates to strike.

Tom, Owen and I are making our first moves in *Sins of a Solar Empire*, a game of interstellar strategy that's going to swallow all of our lunchbreaks for a week. I take it on myself to secure an economic lead – ostensibly so I can support my allies, but really because I'm determined to have the biggest graph. Then it occurs to me to check the bounty board.

In *Sins*, players can pay to place bounties on one another. Pirate fleets strike at regular intervals, targeting the most lucrative mark. Knowing when to spend and when to defend is key. I'm suddenly aware that the three AI players have decided to bet everything on Owen, who is currently wandering around the office.

I start trying to redirect the pirates towards the AI. Selling off my mineral reserves, I match their collective bounty on Owen. They spend more. I match them again. With the first raid imminent, I've got the lead, but I'm penniless. The bounty on Owen pulls ahead by only four credits, and the pirates are off. They tell me that my aggressive bounty-building hasn't gone unnoticed. The next round of bidding begins, and three AI opponents turn their gaze on me.

READ ME
RELEASED February 2008
OUR REVIEW PCG 222, 87%
BUY IT £12.99
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TOP 10 DOWNLOADS

Your *Crysis* nanosuit is no match for the creeping unease of Newport.

1 Weird tales

MOD EXPERIENCE THE UNSETTLING **WORRY OF NEWPORT**

I'm picking my way across a ruined dockside in the pouring rain. Thunder reverberates from the hillsides of the island beyond. A sweeping lighthouse beam picks out the treeline, dappled in the gloom. Reaching a ladder, my arms and thighs come into view. I am wearing a nanosuit.

The Worry of Newport achieves remarkable things with *Crysis* technology, and for the most part, the transformation is successful. You're an amnesiac piecing together the history of a settlement torn apart by horrors from the deep. Part *Amnesia*, part *Dark Corners of the Earth*, *The Worry of Newport* is a distinctive and vividly realised take on H P Lovecraft's fiction.

Adopting the format of a two-part short story, it's far more about exploration than combat. Physical danger is rare. Instead, you're looking for logs and diaries under the guidance of a narrator: yourself, in the future, retelling your own experience. Thanks to this continual accompaniment, it's rarely difficult to figure out what is expected of you. Some tension is lost, but in its place you get a well-told and carefully curated story. When you are allowed to wander, your discoveries feel legitimate.

It's rarely scary, but as Lovecraft understood, it's atmosphere that matters. *Newport* gets away with the odd-immersion breaking peek behind the curtain – and a few ropey voiceover moments – because of the tremendous job the team has done of making *Crysis* their own. Even when the tone shifts toward something more typical of the base game, random phenomena – noises with no source, objects moving without provocation, shadowed figures in the distance – mean there's always something to see. You're rewarded for your attention to detail even as you make your way through staged events.

It's a literary experience, both in how much reading it asks you to do and in how much occurs within your own imagination. In this context, however, that's entirely appropriate. **CT**

CHRIS SAYS...
"I enjoyed this mod so much that now I'm incurably insane. Great!"

SIZE 192.8MB **LINK** bit.ly/worryofnewport

2 MOD

THE DAEDRA'S IN THE DETAILS

SKYRIM AS IT'S MEANT TO BE

Out of the box, *Skyrim* is a lovely looking game – but not quite as lovely as it could be. These texture mods add depth and detail.

Xenius' Character Enhancement
This texture suite fixes such issues as blocky faces, low-res eyes and muddy-textured beast people. *bit.ly/skyrimxenius*

Skyrim HD
Modder NebuLa is redrawing *Skyrim* from scratch. If you're interested in a sharper, grittier Tamriel, this texture set is for you. *bit.ly/skyrimhd*

Enhanced Night Skyrim
Replaces Skyrim's night sky with high-res starfield photography – without losing any of the constellations central to *Elder Scrolls* lore. *bit.ly/skyrimnight*

Vurt's Flora Overhaul
You're going see a lot of trees in *Skyrim*. From bark to branches, this mod lets you customise them. *bit.ly/skyrimflora*

3 The outer limits

FREEWARE EGRESS TAKES YOU TO ANOTHER WORLD

In the beginning, *Egress* resembles nothing so much as that classic LucasArts adventure *The Dig*. You're an unnamed astronaut, repairing a deep-space probe under the guidance of Jacobs, your subordinate.

As you point-and-click your way through a basic initial puzzle, you're attacked by, well, something. You wake on an alien planet, and the rest of the game's short running time is spent figuring out why you've been abducted, what it means, and what exactly has happened to Jacobs.

Australian developer Dane Krams has produced beautifully hand-illustrated backdrops and characters, evoking a lonely – but never drab – other world. *Egress* is even unsettling at points, particularly as the mystery unfolds and it becomes clear that being stranded is the least of your concerns. Unlike traditional point-and-click adventures, there's a heavy emphasis on choice: not just what actions you choose to take, but your attitude toward them.

Solutions to puzzles can sometimes be unclear, but this is often because in any given case there are several, and whichever you opt for alters the game's perception of you.

It soon becomes clear that *Egress* isn't just a space adventure, but something closer to a haunting extraterrestrial personality test. To say more would spoil the experience. Let it suffice that *Egress* executes an abrupt shift in direction with impressive confidence. **CT**

SIZE 57.5MB LINK bit.ly/egressgame

4 Military-industrial complex

WEBGAME THERE IS ONLY WAR IN **FAIL-DEADLY**

You're a shadowy secret organisation attempting to cause the annihilation of two factions. To do so, you've got to control both sides, escalating the conflict until their only recourse is all-out nuclear war.

A MAKE THE CALL Every five seconds, a new move appears here – a new building, a power-up, or an airstrike. You have no control over what it's going to be, but you have to find a place for it: like deadly *Tetris*.

B OVER THE TOP Units are automatically generated by buildings, and will attempt to destroy the other side's silo. This can't happen, so try to keep the scrap contained in the centre of the map.

C THIS IS THE END When the threat level hits maximum, you can activate both factions' missile silos at once. Keeping the battle controlled for another 30 seconds will trigger all-out nuclear war.

SIZE Browser-based LINK bit.ly/faildeadlygame

5 WEBGAME

HEY ROBOT BOY

PIECE YOURSELF BACK TOGETHER IN *KOLM 2*

Like its predecessor, *KOLM 2* is a 2D exploration platformer in the vein of *Metroid* or *Cave Story*. Unlike many of its kind, however, it starts you off with all of your upgrades from the previous game intact, allowing you to head off into ever-more-interesting territory.

Your broken robot boy hero is vulnerable to sunlight, adding

> **"Shadow manipulation and careful timing are added to the list of skills you'll need"**

shadow manipulation and careful timing to the list of skills you'll need to proceed. You'll even find yourself controlling two characters at once before too long, broadening the scope of *KOLM 2*'s puzzles. **CT**

SIZE Browser-based
LINK bit.ly/kolm2game

6

FREEWARE

CATHODE RAYGUN

CRT SCREENS RUN FREE IN THE ASCII-DRIVEN *ALTCODE*

In the future, when robotic alien warships assault the Earth, you'll be glad you kicked your old CRT monitor into a dusty corner in favour of something shiny and flat.

According to *Altcode*, that's when our clunky former screens will band together into an angry hivemind, turn into starships, and save us all. Stranger things have happened.

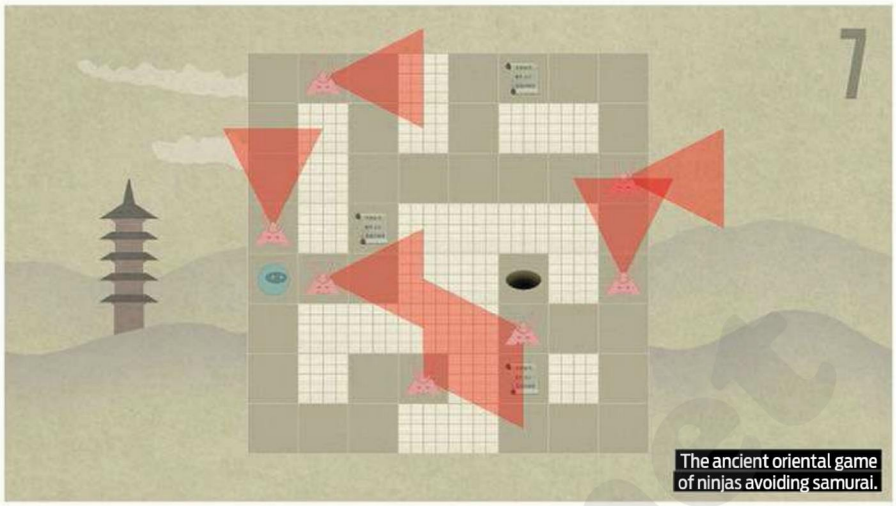
A side-scrolling shooter rendered entirely in ASCII characters, *Altcode*

"The more you shoot, the slower you get, so there's even a light tactical element"

was made in only four hours for Blitzcast November. There's a surprising amount of variety: you'll blast your way through not only aliens but minefields, asteroid fields and bases. The more you shoot, the slower you become, so there's even a light tactical dimension to balancing firepower and manoeuvrability.

A fun, well-rounded little game with a unique look, and particularly impressive considering it was made in less than an afternoon. **CT**

SIZE 3.9MB LINK bit.ly/altcodegame



The ancient oriental game of ninjas avoiding samurai.

7 PYJAMA PARTY

FREEWARE TREAD SOFTLY IN **NINJA VS SAMURAI**

If you think about it, the playground game 'What's The Time Mr Wolf' is just an exercise in turn-based stealth: a game of timing, anticipation and careful action.

That's why *Ninja vs Samurai* reminds me of it. You control a spherical ninja, moving square-by-square across a grid-based map populated by pink patrolling samurai. When you take a step, they take a step, moving along predetermined routes. To get to the exit – and pick up any optional scrolls along the way – you'll have to determine exactly how and when to move to stay out of their cones of vision (and the resultant katana-borne death.)

At the easiest level you'll be up against three or four samurai at a time, but *Ninja vs Samurai* gives you immediate access to its larger, more challenging levels. These sprawling stages feel like threading a needle through the workings of a clock. An angry, heavily armed clock. Quickly, tricks are learned. The turn-based, grid-based action means that moving towards a samurai who is about to turn allows you to swap places with him unseen.

Timing these manoeuvres just-so in order to evade a room full of the chaps is surprisingly evocative of being an actual invisible master of shadows.

Scrolls and an optimal turn-count for each level add extra challenge, but there is already an generous amount of puzzles.

A papery, origami feel and light, appropriate music round out a well-presented package. Like *Stealth Bastard* before it, *Ninja vs Samurai* is proof that sneaking isn't the sole preserve of high-budget immersive sims. **TS**

SIZE 7.9MB LINK bit.ly/ninjasamuraigame

8 Build an ark

FREEWARE **FFFLOOD** TAKES YOU BACK TO BOOT CAMP

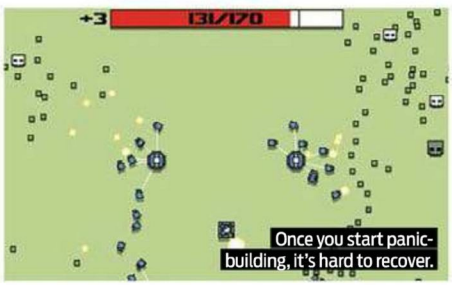
Tower defence games remain as popular as they ever were, but the tendency among developers is to branch out: to build those core fundamentals into an action game or a co-op experience. Vlambeer's *Fffflood*, on the other hand, is an attempt to address perceived issues with the concept of tower defence itself.

You're tasked with placing turrets to defend a central base on a top-down map. When a wave begins, tiny pixel enemies will swarm your central position. Holding out until a capture bar fills up earns you money and upgrade points. Where *Fffflood* differs is in its emphasis on ever-changing circumstances. Your ability to forecast where enemies will appear is limited to a direction, and this can change on the fly. What upgrades you're likely to need may only become apparent in the heat of battle. Turning annihilation into victory in these circumstances is thrilling and, I suspect, how tower defence should feel.

It's a proof-of-concept, and there are a lot of tweaks still to be made, but *Fffflood*'s mixture of frantic decision-making and deep customisation make for something refreshing in its simplicity. **CT**

SIZE 1.2MB LINK bit.ly/fffflood

Place turrets next to a core to boost your capture rate.



Once you start panic-building, it's hard to recover.

9 Rashomod

MOD HONE YOUR **TOTAL WAR: SHOGUN 2 GAME** TO A FINE AND DEADLY EDGE

The *Total War* community is dedicated when it comes to fine-tuning its favourite games. Even the generally well-received *Total War: Shogun 2* has had a lot of attention since its release in March, with mods addressing everything from morale and economy to the most realistic colour for feudal Japanese bows. If something has irked you in the campaign, chances are that somebody else has already addressed it.

We've selected a few comprehensive packages that allow you to tailor the game to your own liking, at varying levels of obsessive intensity.

Most mods are compatible with Creative Assembly's own additions to the game, the Ikko Ikki Clan Pack, Sengoku Jidai Unit Pack, and the Rise of the Samurai Campaign. **CT**

Ultimate Combat Mod

These packages make subtle changes to the existing balance of the game, without an overhaul. At the basic level, the changes emphasise longer battles with a more detailed morale system. The 'HardcorX' pack increases unit sizes for larger, more aggressive battles, while the 'TactiX' pack emphasises the importance of individual unit abilities to increase strategic challenge.

SIZE 176.62MB LINK bit.ly/shogunucm

DarthMod

This vast mod makes comprehensive changes to the whole game. Unit movement is slower, missile weapons are overhauled, army sizes are increased accross the board. AI clans are made more interesting with a greater emphasis on navies and an end to 'teleporting' generals. If you're looking for a tougher, more considered game, this is it.

SIZE 481.72MB LINK bit.ly/shogundarthmod

Shogun 2 Realism +

Aiming to create a more immersive game, *Shogun 2 Realism +* adds 40 new units and restructures the campaign, increasing the importance of cultural influence and ensuring that factions develop as they did in the Sengoku Jidai. Of note for history buffs is the increased attention to army composition, where clans field the units most appropriate to them.

SIZE 1.48MB LINK bit.ly/shogunrealism

10 WEBGAME

THE WORM TURNS

AVOID OBVIOUS GAGS WITH *SNAKE ON A PLANE*

Snake on a Plane bears only the slightest resemblance to the phone game from which it takes its title. You're still steering a serpent at right-angles around a stage and eating pellets to grow longer, but gone is the perpetual movement.

Instead, the object of each stage is to eat enough pellets to unlock the exit in the fewest moves possible. Also, the snake is now affected by gravity: unless at least

"Unless at least one segment of your snake is touching the ground, you'll fall"

one segment is touching the ground, you'll fall. Success is a case of timing your pellet collection such that you're long enough to reach up to the places you need to get to, when you need to get to them.

It's easy to get stuck in a hole or fall back to the start if you're not careful, but restarts are instant. Later stages bring teleporters and reversed gravity, but it won't take you more than half an hour to see it all. **CT**

SIZE Web-based LINK bit.ly/urVvcI

MACHINIMA

SHOWBOATING FROM THE FRONTLINES OF **BATTLEFIELD 3**

If *Arma* presents you with war as experienced by real people, then *Battlefield 3* is war as experienced by heavily-armed stuntmen. Even with the bendy-legged madness of open beta behind us, players are still finding ways to break the rules. **CT**

Lemmings!

1 Damavand Peak's cliff-jumping interlude is a welcome change of pace from hiding in the bushes. This clip by Hazard Cinema sees a whole team leap at once. *bit.ly/bf3basejump*

Swing Low

2 Here, a pilot pays his respects to *BF3*'s queues-for-aircraft by dipping his wings directly into someone's face. Well, they were waiting for a jet. *bit.ly/bf3jetroadkill*

Longshot

3 Include 'Longest Headshot' stats on Battlelog and this is what you get. Enviable marksmanship from the antenna on Caspian Border. *bit.ly/bf3longshot*

Air-to-Air

4 Only the very best can shake a pursuer in a dogfight: and that's not quite what happens here, in this liberal interpretation of 'surface-to-air missile'. *bit.ly/bf3airtoair*

TERRAFORMED

TOM SENIOR RETURNS TO **TERRARIA** FOR SWEET, FIERY REVENGE

The huge 1.1 update for 2D crafting and exploring sim *Terraria* adds new items, monsters, bosses, crafting recipes, household decorations and graphical updates, but for *Terraria* players all of these additions pale in comparison with a new method to gain revenge against the immortal Guide.

The Guide is the first person you meet in *Terraria*. He's supposed to teach you the basic skills needed to survive the randomly generated world you've just stepped into. Instead, he delivers useless scraps of wisdom with the vagueness of a senile Jedi Master. Like many, my first hours in *Terraria* were spent fending off nocturnal flying eyeball monsters and clicking on the Guide repeatedly for advice. "You should stay indoors at night," he would say. Good idea! But how do I build a house? "Smashing a shadow orb will cause a meteor to fall out of the sky." What? "They say there is a person who will tell you how to survive in this land – oh wait. That's me." Worst. Guide. Ever.

READ ME
FIRST REVIEWED
PCG 229, 79%
PUBLISHER
Re-Logic
DEVELOPER
In-house
REQUIRES
1.6GHZ CPU, 128MB video card, 512MB RAM, 200MB HDD
LINK
bit.ly/dZY95o
COMMUNITY
bit.ly/kQ44ru

The Guide is so proud of his ability to say incomprehensible things at random that he'll try his best to make his services available to you 24 hours a day. By moving into your house. Once he's made himself at home he'll amuse himself by taking walks outside, leaving all the doors open behind him and letting zombies into your kitchen.

Mr Lava Lava

Most *Terraria* players will agree that he's a terrible housemate, and needs to die. It's fitting, then, that the latest update revolves around destroying him in the most horrifying way possible.

You'll have to travel to the depths of hell to get your revenge. One of the fluttering harpies down there will be carrying a Guide voodoo doll. Throwing the doll into lava will serve a fiery eviction notice to the Guide, wherever he is on the surface. Unfortunately, doing this will also summon a colossal Wall of Flesh that will pursue you relentlessly through hell until one of you is dead.

This horrific creature is one of four new giant bosses added in the latest update. Killing it will activate 'hard mode', instantly repopulating your world with more powerful monsters and more desirable loot. New bosses include Skeletron Prime, a giant floating skull with four giant arms; the Destroyer, a giant robot snake that spawns floating probes that shoot lasers; and The Twins, two giant evil eyeballs that must be defeated before the sun rises.

"Doing this will summon a colossal Wall of Flesh that will pursue you through hell until one of you is dead"

Killing these bosses will drop some of the best new weapons, like the laser rifle or the rod that shoots deadly rainbows. Other new weapons include the Megashark, an advanced version of the Minishark, described as being "half gun, half shark, completely awesome".

The great thing about the 1.1 update is that the developers haven't revealed exactly what's in it. The method used to summon the Wall of Flesh was only hinted at by a cryptic entry in the patch notes which suggested that "putting the Guide Voodoo Doll in lava is now a bad idea". The first player to try this must have experienced quite a shock.

The update adds 21 new accessories, 36 new monsters and new NPCs that live underground – we're all scrabbling to find them, but many remain undiscovered. *Terraria*'s greatest strength is the sense of exploration as you mine deeper into the earth. The addition of so many new items means there's now something interesting in almost every chest.

I find myself becoming completely absorbed with every mining expedition. Each time I return to the surface, I'm carrying something weird that I don't know what to do with, like a metal statue of a hammer, or some precious new ore I've never seen before.

I know that they're likely to be components with which to craft something powerful from *Terraria*'s expanding range of insane weaponry, but until I find out what they do, I keep them locked away in my equivalent of the warehouse of dangerous relics from Indiana Jones.

It's not just the loot. The world itself has become stranger and more dangerous with the new update. As you wander you'll encounter mountains, deserts, jungles, small oceans and the festering corrupt lands full of flying demons and vicious spiked brambles.

Once the Wall of Flesh has been defeated, Hallowed ground stars appearing. These idyllic new zones are full of blue grass, multicoloured trees, rainbows and mentally unstable unicorns that will charge you on sight. Like corrupt lands, Hallowed ground will infect nearby territory with happiness and vicious pixies, gradually spreading to take over the entire world.

It's the variety

Alongside the floating islands, falling meteors and glowing underground mushroom forests that were in *Terraria* at launch, recent updates make *Terraria*'s worlds some of gaming's most interesting and unpredictable places to explore. The latest update has made it much prettier, too. Layered backgrounds give *Terraria*'s 2D world some much-needed depth and new lighting technology does wonders for *Terraria*'s murky underworld.

Really, building is the only aspect of *Terraria* that hasn't been improved upon by the latest patch, but there are signs that Re-Logic will make some adventurous additions soon. Patch 1.1 introduces pumps, which let you propel liquids, including lava, all the way up to the surface. Underground traps are activated by switches and tripwires. If players are given more tools, and the ability to wire up their own devices, we might start seeing builds approaching *Minecraft* levels of complexity.

But *Terraria* is already brilliant. It has flourished dramatically since its release in May. Its worlds are mad, varied and full of exciting gadgets and surreal bosses. It's just £5.99 on Steam, and it's easy to sink 50 hours into it. If you like to explore, loot, hoard and craft, *Terraria* will gobble up your life faster than an enraged giant eyeball of Cthulhu.

SURVIVING TERRARIA Top tips the Guide won't give you

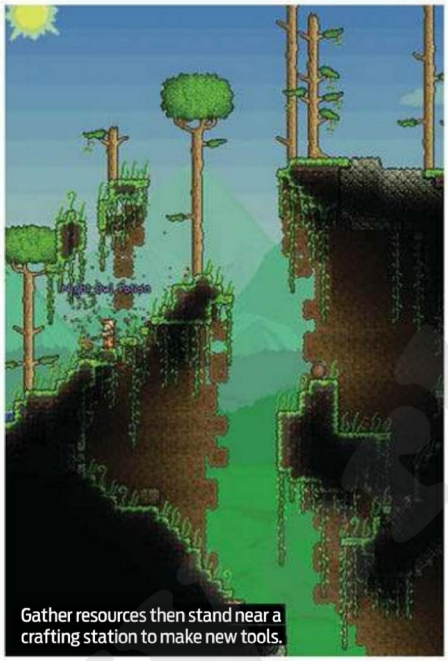
Eye eye captain
"If you find a 'suspicious eyeball', don't eat it at night. Unless you enjoy being crushed by a giant eyeball."

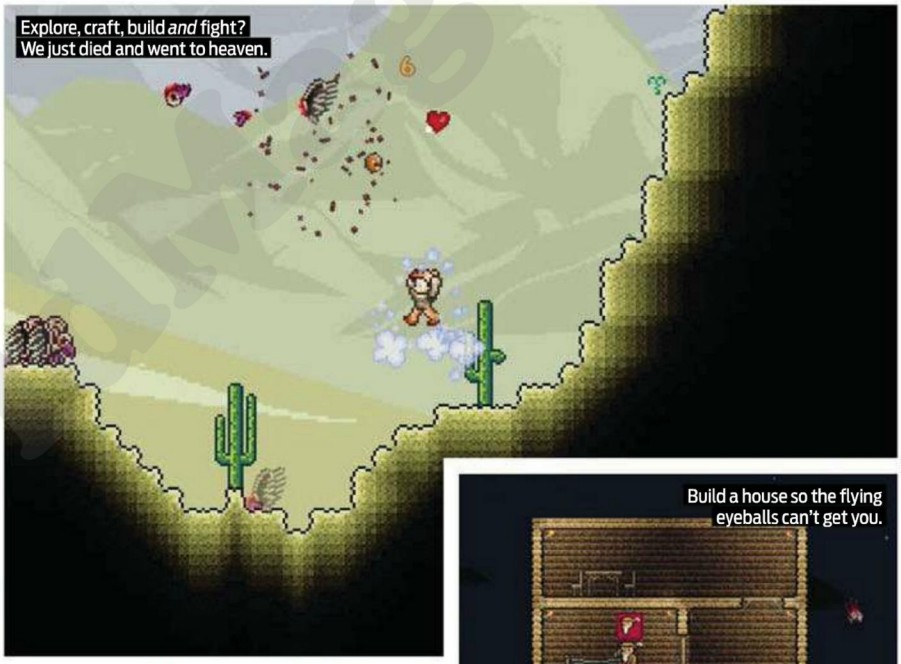
Don't make him angry
"Standing around outside while holding a water candle will incur the wrath of King Slime. You wouldn't like him when he's angry."

Burning love
"If you find a Guide voodoo doll, do not throw it into lava. I really like not being on fire."

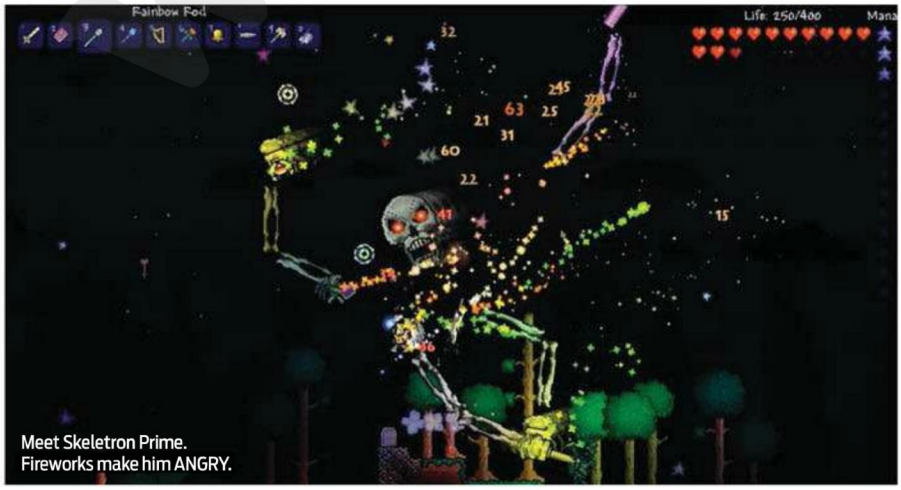
Gerontophobia rules
"If you find the Old Man, do not speak to him. He is not your friend. He is a giant skeleton in disguise."

Giant flaming robot worm battle. Just another night out in Terraria.


Gather resources then stand near a crafting station to make new tools.


Explore, craft, build *and* fight? We just died and went to heaven.

Build a house so the flying eyeballs can't get you.



Meet Skeletron Prime. Fireworks make him ANGRY.

New biomes make for some deadly hiking trips.

Discover the secrets of the frozen north

TOM FRANCIS FINDS THE BEST BITS OF **THE ELDER SCROLLS V: SKYRIM**

GET STARTED

DIFFICULTY Easy

TIME 2 hours

VITAL LINKS:

UESP Wiki - comprehensive info on items and quests
bit.ly/Skwiki

The PC Gamer tourist's guide to Skyrim
bit.ly/SkyTourist

Tom's video of extreme pickpocketing in action
bit.ly/SkyPocket

Guide to handy console commands
bit.ly/SkyConsole

As the Greybeards' ancient mantra goes, the land of *Skyrim* is big and really, really full of stuff. You can happily explore it for hundreds of hours, but you can also make those hundreds of hours happier if you do some of the coolest stuff early on.

It's not just a case of better gear for higher stats, either: *Skyrim*'s most interesting and best-hidden secrets can change the way you play the game, open up new lives to live, and turn people into sweetrolls.

Because of the completely open way in which the game is structured, any given snippet of information could be something that you discovered in the first half hour of play, or something you still don't know after months. So it's likely you'll know some of these, but hopefully a good proportion will be news to you.

Even the main quest is something plenty of gamers skip, so where it's worth doing we'll let you know how far you need to get through it to access the really cool stuff.

As far as spoilers go, this guide will inevitably tip you off to abilities and items you can acquire, and where to get them. We'll skip over the plot details, though, since there's no particular advantage in knowing them in advance, and it's fun to discover them for yourself.

1 Become a werewolf

In *Oblivion*, the Fighter's Guild was pretty boring; in *Skyrim*, it turns you into a goddamn werewolf. Once a day you can use a power that transforms you into your beast form. For a limited time, you can bound around on all fours, knock people flying with your claws, and eat their bodies to regain health and extend your wolftime. The downside is that you can't wear armour, use weapons or drink potions in beast form.

2 Become a vampire

Becoming one is easy: just let a vampire hit you a few times. There's a fort full of them south-southeast of Helgen, where you start. Wait until you get a disease, and don't cure it for a few days. You won't be shunned by society unless you go a long time without feeding on sleeping people. Not feeding is also how you get the most powerful abilities, including two minutes of invisibility. To get cured, ask any innkeeper for rumours.

3 Cheap Paralysis

Paralysis is the best spell: it freezes people rigid and they keel over while they're frozen. It's a high-level Alteration spell that costs a vast amount of magicka, but luckily there's an easier way. Early in Snapleg Cave, halfway up a cliff face due east of Ivarstead, there's an open chest containing a Staff of Paralysis: an item anyone can use which paralyses the target for 10 seconds with every shot. It can be recharged with cheap soul gems.

4 Get a pet demon

When you turn (level) 14, do what any 14-year-old should (under no circumstances) do: head to the nearest tavern. You'll find a chap named Sam Guinne there; accept his drinking challenge. If you can't find him, try Whiterun, or hit ` and type: player.placeatme 0001BB9C to summon him. He leads to a highly entertaining quest that gets you a staff that'll summon a Dremora, a servant of hell who'll fight for you with a huge Daedric sword.

5 Call in dragon support

No easy shortcut to this one, I'm afraid, but it's worth knowing: if you complete the main quest, you get a Shout power that can summon a dragon to help you. He takes a moment to fly in, then he'll swoop around attacking your enemies for a few minutes before flying off. Like most dragons, focus is not his strong point: he'll attack, fly off, swoop around, then attack again. He can't be beaten for pure spectacle, though.

6 Kill in one hit

There are lots of ways to deal damage in *Skyrim*, but sneak attacks are king. Draugr make good practise: sneak around crypts and melee them before they rise from the dead. Early on, every hit levels you up in Sneak. Join the Dark Brotherhood to get the Shrouded Gloves for 2x sneak attack damage. Stick with daggers, and a perk lets you do 15x more. They stack, so you end up doing 3,000% of your normal damage: enough to kill almost anything.

7 Get 'free' training

Plenty of people in *Skyrim* can train you in their preferred skill, but it's expensive. If you let them keep your money, that is. If the skill they're training you in is pickpocketing, though, stealing your money back from them is virtually homework. Try nicking it back after each level you pay for: smaller amounts are easier to steal. In the Thieves' Guild, there isn't even a penalty for getting caught – and the gear they give you will help you do it.

8 Steal people's clothes

Once you've trained in Pickpocketing, keep practising: it's worth getting it to ridiculous levels. You don't need to be especially good at sneaking to grind it: just ditch all the stolen items you care about somewhere, and start stealing from people. You'll get caught. Pay the paltry fine, pickpocket the arresting officer, repeat. At Pickpocketing 90, you can steal the weapons from people's hands. At Pickpocketing 100, you can nick the armour off their back.

9 Discover a hidden mushroom forest

Oh gosh. Blackreach. Probably the most beautiful and unusual place in *Skyrim*, hidden under an already extremely deep dwarven ruin: Alftand. It's not immediately accessible, though, so head north from Winterhold onto the icebergs until you see a cave on your compass. Find it, and the guy inside will help get you into Blackreach. Be prepared for a long, tough, and exciting adventure with a spectacular visual reward.

10 Steal dreams

The people of Dawnstar can't sleep. Look into it, and you'll discover a great quest in an old haunted watchtower. I won't spoil the plot for you but there are a few ways it can play out. If you want to steal people's dreams, it should be obvious that you have to Do The Wrong Thing. It'll get you the Skull of Corruption, a staff that can suck the dreams out of sleeping people and use them as charges to do extra damage when you fight with it.

11 Throw your voice

Unrelenting Force, unlocked early in the main quest, is the most immediately satisfying Dragon Shout. But there's another great shout with a subtler use: head to the mountains north-east of Whiterun and look for the dragon head icon on your compass. It'll lead you to the Throw Voice shout, which creates a noise wherever you're aiming, luring your enemies to investigate. It's fantastic for baiting them into horrible traps, or just for slipping by.

12 Turn people into chickens

Oblivion fans might remember the Wabbajack: a unique staff that would transform anyone into a random creature. It's back in *Skyrim*, and it's even more random: now it can do anything from causing a lightning storm to instantly killing them to turning them into a sweetroll. If that suits your playstyle, find a guy called Dervenin wandering the shopping district of Solitude, and help him out. The quest he'll lead you on is... imaginative.

SKILLS

POTION PREP

KEY INGREDIENTS FOR THE MOST USEFUL POTIONS.

1 The potion you'll need most is Restore Health. Look out for Wheat (farms), Imp Stools (cave mushrooms) and Blue Mountain Flowers (flowers, blue, grow on mountains). All are common, and any two make a health potion.

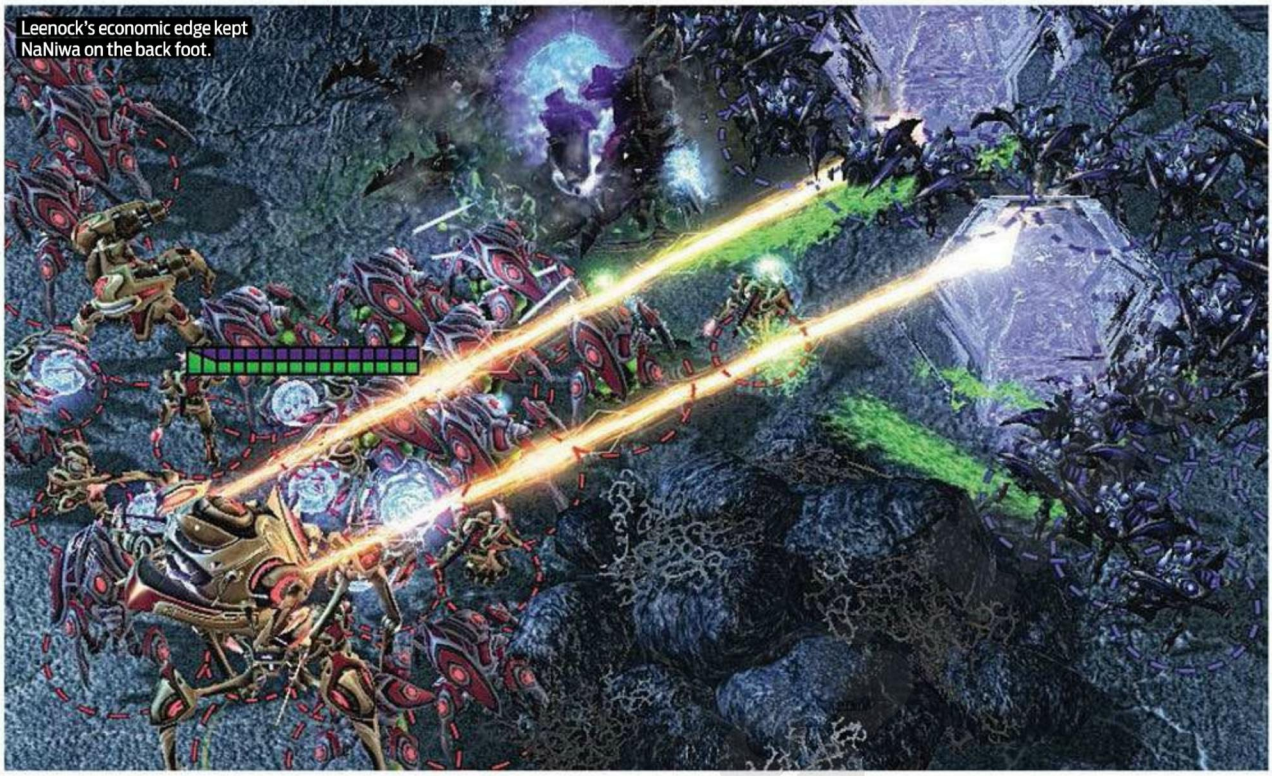
2 Dragons breathe fire or frost, so make potions that boost your resistance to those. Snowberries, Purple Mountain Flowers and Frost Mirriam all make Resist Frost potions, and Bone Meal, Elves' Ear and Snowberries all make Resist Fire.

3 Everyone wants to disappear sometimes. Invisibility potions can be most easily made from Vampire Dust (see Step 2 of the main guide), Nirnroot (glowing shrubs) and Ice Wraith Teeth (it's polite to kill the Ice Wraith first).

BONUS TIP

FREE ARROWS

Equip a companion with one good arrow. They'll fire that type but never run out, and you can retrieve them.


Leenock's economic edge kept NaNiwa on the back foot.

Providence reigns

THE BATTLE FOR THE WORLD'S BIGGEST **STARCRAFT II** PRIZE IN PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND, IS AN UNDERDOG FAIRYTALE

READ ME

WHO?
coL.NaNiwa (Sweden) vs FXO.Leenock (South Korea)

WHERE AND WHEN?
2011 MLG Pro Circuit Final, Providence, Game 5

VOD LINK
bit.ly/vwJz4j

The Major League Gaming finals in Providence, Rhode Island is being called the greatest *StarCraft II* tournament of all time. In part that's thanks to the methodical rise of ace Protoss player Johan 'NaNiwa' Lucchesi, who has dispatched legendary Zerg players DRG and NesTea on the road to the final.

The star of the show, however, was 16-year-old South Korean Zerg player Lee 'Leenock' Dong Nyung. Losing an early game had left him with a major mountain to climb: he had to fight a gruelling seven matches – including ones against the superstars NaNiwa had already defeated – to stay in the tournament. And incredibly, he won them all.

In order to take home the $50,000 prize, NaNiwa only had to win two games against Leenock. But having been previously defeated, Leenock needed four wins to take the prize. And it didn't start well: NaNiwa took the first game cleanly.

But that's when everything changed. Leenock started altering his approach with every round, winning the next three games and forcing NaNiwa into a best of seven. As game 5 began, he only needed one more win to take home an unprecedented underdog victory.

Let battle commence

00.00 NaNiwa begins in the south-west of Xel'Naga Caverns, with Leenock in the north-east. The Swede immediately goes for his signature Forge fast expand, in an attempt to secure the economic edge. His rival goes for gas rather than an early spawning pool. This probably means Roaches, which are tough ranged ground units that can break through early defences.

02.02 True to form, NaNiwa begins construction of a second base. Leenock scouts the map with his floating overlords, and turns out a handful of Zerglings.

02.48 With Leenock's Zerglings on the way, NaNiwa gets his first Proton Cannon defence started just in time. He's playing cautiously, having been caught out by fast Zerglings in Game 4. As expected, Leenock starts building a Roach Warren.

03.20 NaNiwa's wall is complete: Leenock will have to get through the Forge to make his way into the main Protoss base. NaNiwa still only has one Proton Cannon, however.

03.33 Zergling attack! Leenock hits the Forge, and NaNiwa's only Proton Cannon is out of range. This is potentially a disaster: if it goes down, not only will the Zerg have access to the main Protoss base, but NaNiwa won't be able to build any more Cannons.

04.02 The Forge goes down, and Leenock's Zerglings get through the wall-off. To make matters worse, a first batch of Roaches are on their way. It's looking grim for NaNiwa, but some fast micromanagement minimises the damage to his resource-collecting Probes.

04.39 Six of Leenock's Roaches hit NaNiwa's second base, out of range of the Proton Cannons. Without long-ranged Stalkers, there's not a lot that the Protoss can do. Leenock begins a second base: this isn't an all-in attack. He's preparing for the long haul.

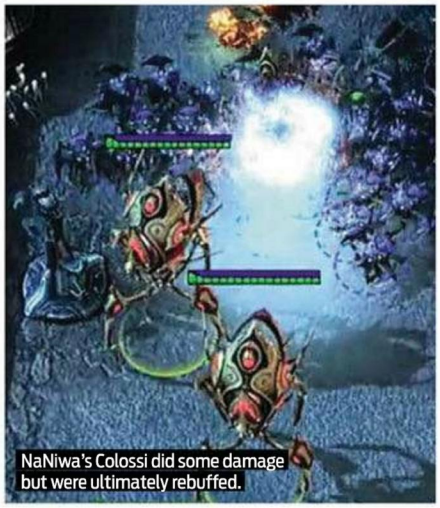
05.07 NaNiwa gets a single Stalker out, but it's not enough: his second Nexus goes down to the Roaches, which quickly retreat. This is a huge blow: his entire strategy centres on having the resource advantage he has now ceded to the Zerg. He'll have to play flawlessly to recover.

05.23 Leenock's Roaches do a lap around the block and reappear to attack NaNiwa's rebuilt Forge. It goes down, but NaNiwa uses the Sentry's Forcefield ability to close the gap and chase the Roaches off. The Protoss is transitioning into a four-gate strategy – he's

NaNiwa's stunning Forcefield control in full effect.

Destroying NaNiwa's fast expansion tilted the game in Leenock's favour.

NaNiwa was trapped in his first base for most of the game.


NaNiwa's Colossi did some damage but were ultimately rebuffed.

Leenock threw bottomless reserves of Roaches at his opponent.

going to amass infantry, with robotics to follow later on.

07.54 As Zerg Creep extends across the map, NaNiwa expands his second base to include gas extractors. He's digging in and building his forces up. A platoon of Stalkers and Sentries explores the map, clearing out some cheaper units. One of Leenock's Overlords escapes a Stalker ambush with only 4 HP left.

08.57 Burrowing Roaches attack NaNiwa's second base, but the Swede's incredible micromanagement sees them off. He uses a ring of Forcefields to prevent them from fleeing, and annihilates the rest. It's not enough to turn the game yet, but the Protoss is back on his feet.

11.01 Leenock establishes a third base and starts to destroy the rocks protecting valuable gold deposits. NaNiwa builds a Pylon at a third base location, indicating that he's trying to reclaim lost time – but Leenock is still ahead.

11.22 Leenock's massed Roaches and Infestors clash with NaNiwa's Stalkers, Sentries and a single Colossus in the centre of the map. Excellent Forcefield use holds the Roaches down while the Colossus' long-range lasers wipe them out. Leenock attempts a Baneling drop – using Overlords to deposit exploding bugs onto NaNiwa's army – but the Stalkers are able to take them out before they become a threat.

11.46 NaNiwa's army, now bolstered by a second Colossus, forces Leenock to cancel his plans for a gold mineral base. Before the Protoss can get any further into Zerg territory, however, he hits another army of upgraded Roaches, Infestors and Banelings. At this stage, Leenock's economic advantage just couldn't be clearer.

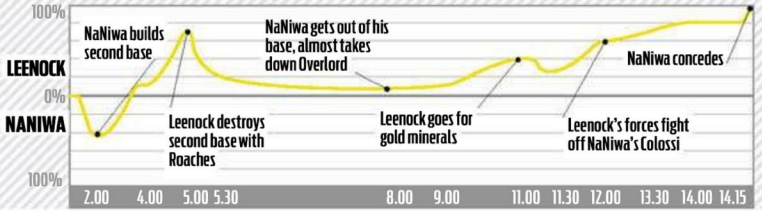
12.23 More incredible micromanagement sees the most important part of NaNiwa's army escape to safety, but he's on the back foot. Two Colossi go down to Leenock's Roaches, but a third escapes back into the main Protoss base, where its superior range is able to send Leenock packing. Each Colossus represents a significant chunk of resources, though, and losing two is a major setback. Regardless, NaNiwa starts construction of a few replacements.

13.36 A Roach horde descends upon NaNiwa's partially complete third expansion, wiping out the Nexus and pushing for the second base. Leenock never commits his whole host to the fight, making NaNiwa's small victories futile.

13.52 NaNiwa successfully traps Leenock's Roaches on the ramp leading to his second base, allowing a bolstered force of Colossi to see them off. The Zerg are already massing reinforcements, however: none of these losses mean anything as resources pour in from four bases, and NaNiwa knows it.

14.16 "Congratulations :)". With that, NaNiwa concedes the game, match and championship. Leenock crosses the stage to shake hands with his opponent, then steps out and punches the air. The crowd is on their feet, chanting his name. The underdog has done it.

TALE OF THE TAPE



Those boots with that hat? I don't think so...

"There's more to the game than just a random loot generator"

CHRIS LIVINGSTON STILL FINDS **TORCHLIGHT** REWARDING

READ ME

FIRST RELEASED
2008

PUBLISHER
(original): Perfect World

DEVELOPER
Runic Games

REQUIRES
800MHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 64MB graphics

LINK
torchlightgame.com

INFLUENCED BY
Far Cry

GET IT FROM
Steam

On the surface, *Torchlight* seems like it would be the perfect casual game, something you'd play when you had ten minutes between meetings or before dinner. It's simple to get into, even for a new player: an action RPG with only three character types, each with three skill paths – no need to plan a character build or scrutinise a wiki to play successfully. Combat, either up close or at range, is as easy as clicking on an enemy.

Quests are uncomplicated and generally involve killing a certain monster or retrieving a specific item. Yet even after playing *Torchlight* for years, it still surprises me how utterly engrossed I can get.

With *Torchlight*, the very things that give it the feel of a casual game – its speed and simplicity – also make it maddeningly difficult to quit. Romping through an entire dungeon level takes only a few minutes, and at the end of the level, there lies a set of stairs leading down. What's one more dungeon? And what's one more after that? Just a few more minutes. And then just a few more. Then you look up blearily to find those minutes have grown into an entire evening.

Case in point: I set out to play *Torchlight* for 20 minutes, just to take some screenshots of the game's different dungeon environments for this article... but then I find a pair of boots.

"The very things that give Torchlight the feel of a casual game – its speed and simplicity – also make it very difficult to quit"

They're an improvement over the pair my Alchemist character is wearing, but I can't put them on yet: the boots' stats indicate that my defence attribute needs to be a few points higher, which means I need to level up a couple times, which means I need to keep playing.

No big deal: levelling in *Torchlight* doesn't take long, especially for a low-level character. It just means a little extra time beating up trolls and felwings and elementals. But as I'm working my way through the dungeons, flinging arcane bolts at swarms of skeletons, zombies, and ghouls, one of them drops a wand. Not *just* a wand, but a much better wand. This new one has an empty socket, meaning I can install a gem inside it, meaning I can improve the improved wand even further. Now I just need to find a gem.

Before I know it, an hour has passed. I've taken my screenshots, I've gained several levels, I'm stomping around in my new boots and I'm clutching my new gem-enhanced wand. And yet I'm still playing, because along the way I've found at least 100 new items: assorted bits of armour, crossbows, swords, axes, rings and amulets. I sell most of them for gold, but there are always a few I keep because they are incrementally better than the items I've got. A new helmet appears: is it better than the one I've been using? A pistol is dropped: I should really try it out on a monster's face. A fishing hole? Let's see what I can pull out of it.

I realise that all this implies that *Torchlight* is nothing but a random loot generator, but the game has loads of appeal and charm. The environments I set out to take pictures of

Amidst all the looting, a level!

Luvverley loot!

Some treasure chests can't be trusted (although they still cough up loot).

The level name says it all...

Between battles, cool off at the fishin' hole.

I'm pretty sure I'm in there somewhere.

(three hours ago, now) are beautifully designed and varied: just tonight I've fought through hellish, lava-oozing landscapes, spooky bat-filled dungeons, crumbling castles with dusty libraries, wooden treetop fortresses, and ancient, waterlogged ruins filled with giant spiders. *Torchlight*'s music and sound design are beautiful, haunting, and appropriately dramatic. And magic – both mine and that of my enemies – lights up the screen with vivid explosions, swirling eldritch clouds, kinetic fireballs and lightning bolts.

The combat is satisfying and meaty, no matter how you play. My first character was a Destroyer, who waded into combat swinging swords and axes, but as an Alchemist I'm relying on spells, which let me conjure an army of tiny purple imps and and a lumbering golem to handle the hands-on combat. I've even taught my pet wolf a couple of summoning spells, so he can conjure up a hovering, flaming sword and a squad of skeleton archers. All I have to do is stand at the back, help out with some arcane blasts, and collect all the loot.

Yes, let's get back to the loot. After a big battle it lies scattered on the screen as if a loot truck collided with a loot factory during a loot festival. Little piles of gold spring from treasure chests and smashed urns, dying enemies barf up scores of weapons and enchanted trinkets, and town stores are stocked with rings, charms, spells, and magical maps that open portals to still more loot-filled realms.

At higher levels, loot becomes not just more powerful in deed but also in appearance. My level 47 Destroyer wears dragonclaw shoulderpads big enough to bathe in and lugs around a sword the size of an airplane wing.

Naturally I'm excited for *Torchlight II*, which promises new character classes, new pets and new realms to explore, not to mention multiplayer, which was missing from the original. Until it arrives, however, I'm still happy to spend time in *Torchlight*. Often, much more time than I intended.

You and your four-legged fiend

The Pet Offensive: four commands for your fanged pal

Sic 'em!
You can have your pet attack enemies on sight, or wait until you're attacked before it wades into battle, like a trained guard-cat.

Spell 'em!
Teach your pet a summoning spell and it will conjure up some pets of its own. Pets for all! It's practically a party.

Sell 'em!
At your command it will scamper back to town and sell all your loot. You can even learn spells to make this take less time.

Shapeshift 'em!
Feed your pet a fish and it will turn into other creatures, such as a spider, elemental, troll, or whatever this goblin thing is.

THE MAKING OF...
BIOSHOCK

HOW KEN LEVINE'S UNDERSEA DYSTOPIA ESCAPED A CULT AND BECAME ONE OF GAMING'S MOST ICONIC SETTINGS. ***By Duncan Geere***

The artwork for *BioShock*'s cover went through many iterations.

READ ME

FIRST REVIEWED
PCG 178, 95%

PUBLISHER
2K Games

DEVELOPER
Irrational Games

RELEASE
2007

BioShock didn't start life under the sea. This nightmarish shooter was conceived very differently. Main villain Andrew Ryan was originally a team of five malevolent AIs. Freaky companions the Little Sisters began their existence as slugs. The Art Deco style of Rapture didn't appear until very late on. Development twisted and turned more than a spider splicer caught in a cyclone trap, but despite the difficult birth, when the game arrived in 2007 it proved successful enough to earn scores of Game of the Year awards from across the games media.

The project began with a very clearly-defined goal: to make Irrational Games' first blockbuster release. The studio, which formed out of the collapse of the influential Looking Glass Studios, had a number of games under its belt that had performed reasonably well, including *SWAT 4*, *Tribes: Vengeance* and *Freedom Force vs the Third Reich*. But the team wanted to make a spiritual successor to 1999's *System Shock 2*, which had gained enormous critical acclaim but was a failure commercially.

"I was hesitant because *System Shock 2* didn't exactly tear up the sales charts and it was maybe a little ahead of its time," says Ken Levine, the creative director of *BioShock* and a co-founder of Irrational. "I was responsible for making sure that we got paid every month, so I was a little nervous about that."

Under the sea

The earliest versions of *BioShock* were almost unrecognisable as the game it is today. There was a point when it was set on an island full of Nazis. Another version cast you as a cult deprogrammer hired by a senator, raising serious moral questions. "One person's cult is another person's church, so it's an interesting job," Levine says. "Essentially if you think about them, they're kidnappers. It makes you quite a dark individual."

The plot twisted because the studio needed something to show potential backers. "When we go out to pitch, we say 'let's throw something out there that we think is okay', and obviously we went through a lot of different permutations, but things evolve."

Eventually, the idea of a city under the sea emerged, but even then it was a very different place to what it was eventually to become. "There was no Andrew Ryan; there were five computer AIs you were up against," says Levine. "I can't remember what they were called – GROUP or something? It was all very strange. And you also actually had a companion character, early on. But a lot of things get tossed aside."

Setting and story aside, a lot of what *BioShock* came to be was starting to fall into place. "The thing that was always going to be there was this notion of the protector and

Little Sister: we haven't slept with the lights off since we met her...

protected class of people." says Levine. "That there were neutrals in the world – characters that didn't attack you on sight."

These became the stomping, clanking Big Daddy and his frail, creepy Little Sister, but even they went through a process of evolution. Little Sisters started life as slug-like creatures. "The problem was that nobody really cared about them. Why do you care? There's no empathy there. So they evolved into an actual little girl," says Levine.

"There was a point when it was set on an island full of Nazis, and another version where the player was a cult deprogrammer"

The character-customising ADAM system emerged around this point, too. "For a long time [the Big Daddy] just dropped money like other characters do – money and loot – and we realised nobody would ever fight him; so we had to give him something exclusive, and that's where ADAM came from. So he had the character growth system locked in the Little Sister, and that's effectively in the Big Daddy from a game design standpoint."

Nailing down the distinctive Art Deco look and combining it with a usable interface was a tricky challenge; the product of long debate and many iterations. One of the earliest sections that survived into the finished game was the Kashmir Restaurant in the first level (where the 1958 New Year's Eve party that triggers the Rapture civil war takes place), which was used as an artistic reference for the entire rest of the game.

In a 2006 community interview on the *BioShock* website, Levine explained why Art Deco became the dominant art style: "I've always loved Art Deco. I was born in New York, and it had an impact on me from an early age. There are also not a lot of games that have leveraged the look, and it looks really great in polygonal forms. Good video game art is all about shape and silhouette. A lot of games get caught up in texture detail, but shape reads a lot better at the relatively low resolution of modern games [compared with, say, movies]. The other great thing about Deco is that it looks like somebody's vision of the future but is so firmly rooted in the past, which is exactly the vibe we were going for in *BioShock*."

The game's architectural style was also very driven by Andrew Ryan's philosophy. Objectivism's creator Ayn Rand wrote in her book, Atlas Shrugged: "My philosophy, in essence, is the concept of man as a heroic being, with his own happiness as the moral purpose of his life, with productive achievement as his noblest activity, and reason as his only absolute."

To that, Levine added in an interview with GameSpy in 2007: "[Art Deco] is a style that says, 'Yes, we are men, and we control the universe!' We're looking into the future."

Reinvention

Despite the amount of thought that went into the game's distinctive look, Levine says that the design was very utilitarian for a long time, until the Art Deco element emerged. "Just figuring out the interface and all those things – there's so much you can do in that game, so interfacing it became a real challenge. "That meant significant simplification of some of the elements that made up the game. Around the time that *BioShock* went into alpha, the team took a long hard look at the mechanics and decided that although it was packed with choices and options, none of them were especially compelling.

A decision was then made to shift the game from a slow, cerebral RPG hybrid to a faster, more intense first-person-shooter. That meant that large parts of the game had to be recalibrated, changing the AI for enemies to suit shorter fights, and dramatically redesigning weapons and plasmids.

Some of the deep systems were simplified tremendously to make them punchier in the fast, dangerous world of Rapture. Nerdy stat changes were excised in favour of a tight focus on the weapons, plasmids and tonics. Although that meant fewer choices overall, the ones that remained were more functional, more understandable, and more fun.

Of course, this meant that the release schedules had to be completely redrawn, but publishers 2K Games had enough faith in the game to allow the team to take the time to get ▶

things right, rather than rushing a messy, unfinished product out the door. Later, at the Develop conference in 2008, Levine would tell the audience: "There's no way this game would have been made without a leap of faith."

Strike teams

The pressure was showing. By 2007, the game was well past beta but a big stack of content was still coming online – including an almost complete rewrite of the game's dialogue and plot. This meant that people were getting content in place while also fixing bugs, and certain parts of the story had to be retrofitted back into the existing game.

Complicating matters was the fact that the game was being released on the Xbox 360 too, and in multiple languages. Alyssa Finley, *BioShock*'s project lead, said in an interview with Game Developer magazine in 2008: "A lot of our problems came from underestimating how big the task of making a triple-A product for multiple platforms and multiple regions really is. Other problems came from over-estimating our capacity to solve those problems using our existing procedures and staffing levels."

The studio turned to using small, focused strike teams to deal with issues – choosing one problem at a time, analysing and solving it, then moving on. One area where this worked most effectively was the design of the weapons. As the game approached the crunch period, where the addition of new features is effectively stopped and the priority is on fixing bugs (which for *BioShock* lasted twice as long as expected), the weapons were in place and working, but weren't feeling as good as they should have been.

A team consisting of a designer, animator, modeller, programmer, effects specialist and an audio designer tackled a single weapon at a time. They met up and went deep into every aspect of what the weapon should be and the role that it played in the game. Tasks were assigned to each team member, who then worked on them for a couple of days before meeting up again. When everyone was happy, they moved on to the next weapon. As well as guns, the game's AI, animation, visual effects and cinematics were all subjected to the same painstaking process.

Questionable morality

Much of *BioShock*'s storyline deals heavily with morality and the grey area that exists between good and evil, and so it has often been questioned why the ending is so black and white – you either get the 'good' ending, or one of two 'evil' ones, depending solely on whether you saved or harvested the Little Sisters.

Levine says this was a request from "higher up the food chain". "I really just wanted a single ending that was quite ambiguous. You can definitely make an argument that having two endings was a good thing – people like multiple endings. I just didn't feel like that was the right thing for that story."

One area where Levine stuck to that philosophy was the moment of decision when you capture a Little Sister. Originally, the icons for 'harvest' and 'save' had a little angel and a little devil, and those were removed by Levine because he didn't want that to be so black and white. In the sequence where Atlas and Tenenbaum are telling the player to do different but equally compelling things, Levine says that he didn't want to announce to the player that one option was good and the other was evil. "I'm a fan of ambiguity in a lot of respects," he says.

GAMEOGRAPHY

Irrational Games formed from the ashes of Looking Glass Studios in 1997, and has turned out an impressive range of titles since then.

System Shock 2 *(1999)*
"Lo-lo-look at you, hacker..." stutters one of gaming's most enduring villains, the malevolent AI Shodan. This cyberpunk horror was loved by critics but didn't sell well. However, it planted the seeds of *BioShock*.

Tribes: Vengeance *(2004)*
Better known as *Tribes 3*, *Vengeance* went down reasonably favourably with reviewers, but hardcore fans saw it as a dumbing down of the series to appease a wider audience.

Freedom Force vs The 3rd Reich *(2005)*
The *Freedom Force* strategy games, which started with *Freedom Force* in 2002, saw the player guide a team of superheroes in an assault on Nazi Germany during World War II, complete with a comic book art style.

SWAT 4 *(2005)*
Irrational were brought to produce a police procedural shooter for the fourth in the popular *SWAT* series. Sadly Sierra implemented severe cost-cutting measures in late 2004 and closed in 2008.

BioShock Infinite *(2012)*
Irrational didn't work directly on *BioShock 2*, handing over the reins to stablemates 2K Marin. Instead, the studio has been working on a reimagining of the *BioShock* universe on a vast airship-city in the sky. Expect to see it land sometime in 2012.

"Much of *BioShock*'s storyline deals heavily with morality and the grey area that exists between good and evil"

Legacy

BioShock's influence on the wider world of gaming is a matter of debate. The addition of RPG elements to shooters has proliferated widely since *BioShock*'s release, with even the most hardened military FPS games now including some form of levelling and personalisation system in their multiplayer components. While it might be tough to argue that *BioShock* was the sole cause of this trend, it's fair to say that the game was enormously successful in bringing those ideas to the mainstream, having sold more than four million copies.

If nothing else, it proved that complex RPG elements and a cerebral storyline that revolved around Objectivist ideas could be accepted by the wider gaming public – and sell.

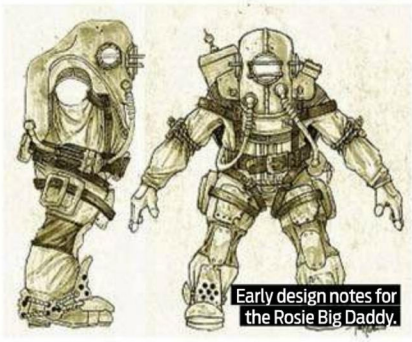
Levine is modest about the legacy that *BioShock* has left the industry. "I think it's probably better for other people to answer that question besides me," he says. But he adds: "I hope it really encourages people to focus a lot more on detailed world creation. I like that as a gamer – I like feeling like I'm in a world that I believe in. So hopefully that's given people a nudge and said 'Hey, pay attention to your world and not just your characters' as well."

The studio's next project is the upcoming *BioShock Infinite*. It leaves the watery depths of Rapture in favour of a steampunk city in the clouds. The player controls a former Pinkerton agent, Booker DeWitt, who's been hired by mysterious individuals to try to recover a girl called Elizabeth.

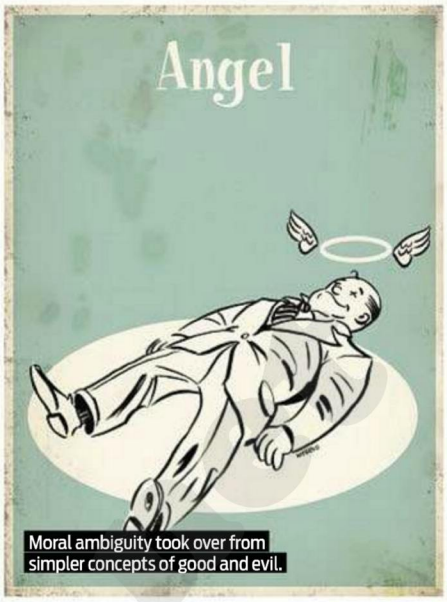
It's easy to see where the studio is slotting in some of the interesting ideas that got stripped out of the original *BioShock*. The grey morality of the actions of DeWitt in coming to 'rescue' Elizabeth are remarkably close to the original cult deprogrammer storyline dumped from the first game – something that Levine freely admits. "I think some of that dark individual got brought over to Booker," he says. "I had to get it out somewhere."

"With each game we do something different and with *Infinite*, we're trying to experiment with these improvisational characters. We'll see how successful we're going to be, but hopefully there'll be some lessons that others can take away from that."

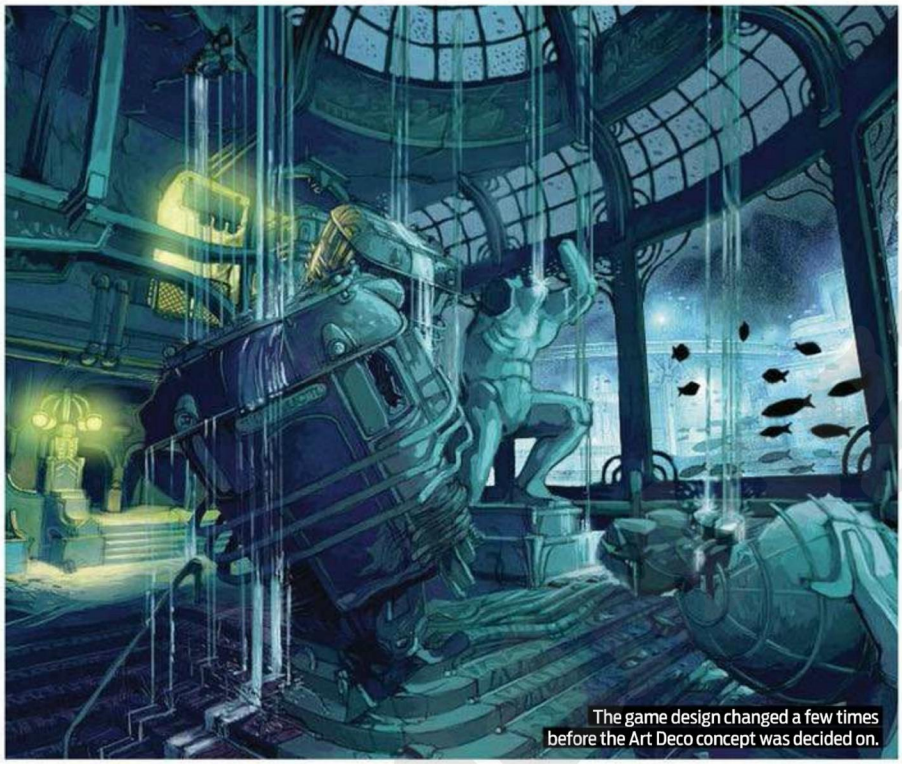
What a looker: concept sketches for Toasty.



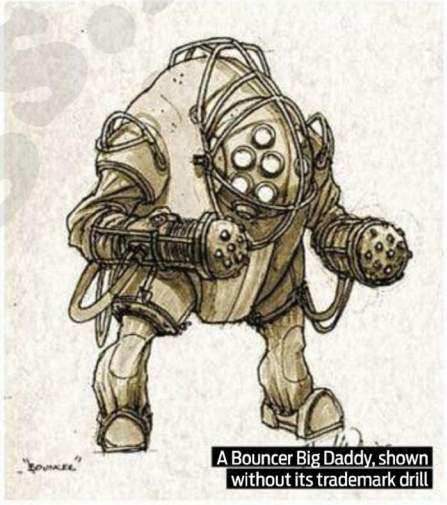
Early design notes for the Rosie Big Daddy.



Moral ambiguity took over from simpler concepts of good and evil.



The game design changed a few times before the Art Deco concept was decided on.



A Bouncer Big Daddy, shown without its trademark drill

Rapture founder Andrew Ryan is a big Ayn Rand fan...

The early character design for Big Daddy was much more sympathetic.

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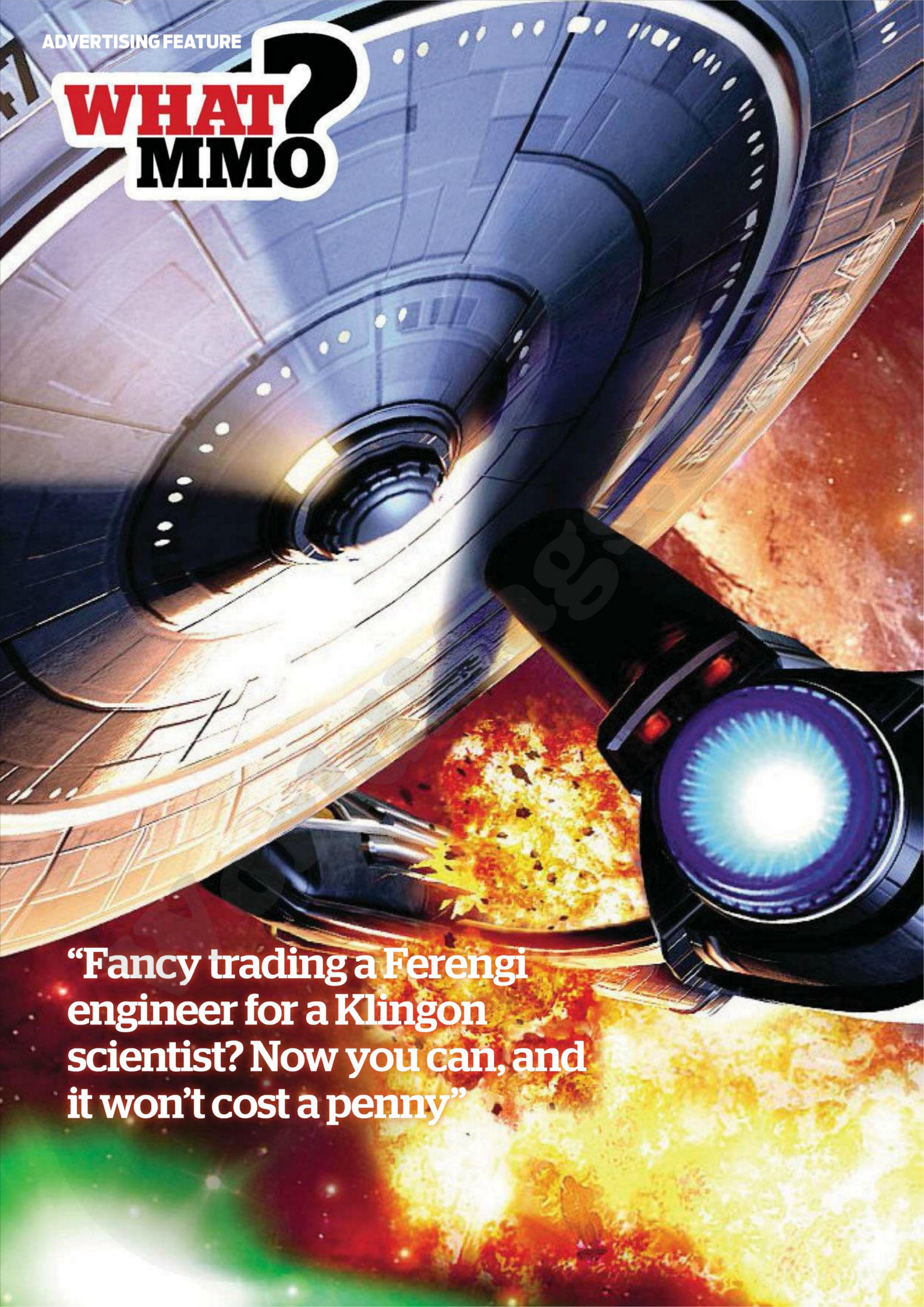

"Fancy trading a Ferengi engineer for a Klingon scientist? Now you can, and it won't cost a penny"

SET PHASERS TO FREE

Star Trek Online plots a course to the free-to-play frontier

As you read this, *Star Trek Online* will be boldly going where so many MMOs have gone recently: the planet free- to-play. Free players will be able to explore strange new worlds in every corner of the galaxy, with only the mission creator locked behind a subscription barrier. Even more unusually, its developers Cryptic have promised the ability to trade in-game dilithium for real money-store points, enabling players to pay for their microtransactions by playing more.

One of the most interesting recent additions to *Star Trek Online* has been the duty officer system. Added in the run-up to free-to-play status, duty officers can be bought, traded and attached to your ships to provide bonuses. It's essentially a collectable card game layered on top of the main MMO adventure. Fancy trading a Ferengi engineer for a Klingon scientist? Now you can, and it won't cost you a penny.

If there's anyone who can tell you the benefits of going free-to-play, it's Sony Online Entertainment, whose *DC Universe Online* has gained over a million players since making the switch. Recently they launched a new DLC pack, called 'Lightning Strikes', which is themed after super speedster The Flash. The pack adds new electricity powers, as well as a new questline which will take you back in time on The Flash's cosmic treadmill. Yes, The Flash has something called a cosmic treadmill, and he runs on it really fast to travel in time. Welcome to comic books.

The success of *DC Universe Online* has no doubt influenced Sony's decision to turn *EverQuest II* into a fully free-to-play game. Previously the game was split between regular paid *EverQuest* and '*EverQuest II Extended*', but now the great paywall is coming crashing down, uniting the fractured player base.

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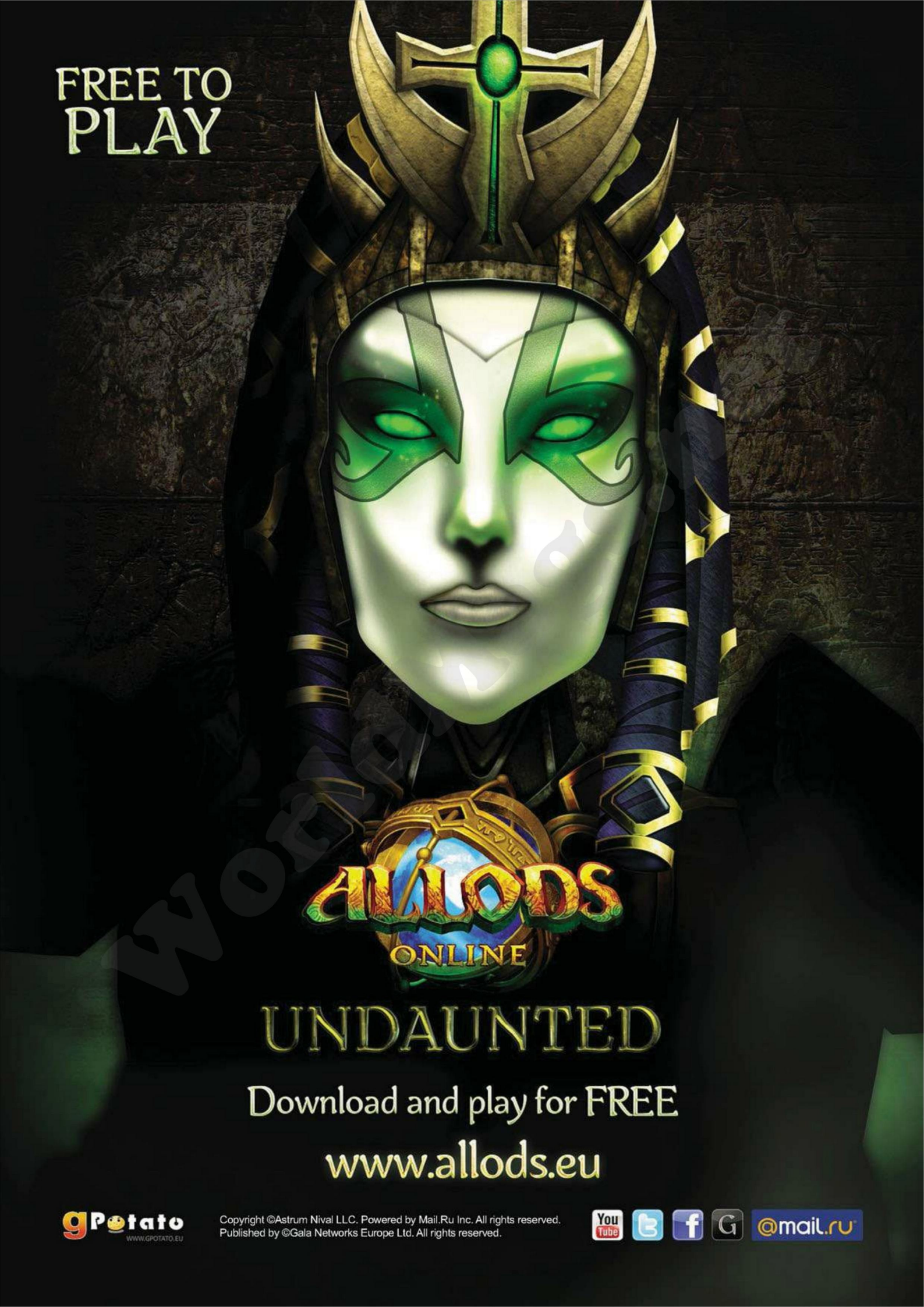
TERRA MILITARIS

Terra Militaris (terra-militaris.gpotato.eu) is gPotato's MMORTS. You take control of an ancient empire, building cities and conquering neighbouring provinces. The developers are currently working on an expansion that promises to overhaul the social aspects: working and trading with other players will increase your 'friend value' and unlock powerful bonuses, creating a real incentive to help each other out. The expansion also promises to bring in more automation via the 'nobility status' system, which will let those with premium accounts automate the resource gathering part of the game in favour or waging war against other players.

CASTLE OF HEROES

Castle of Heroes (heroes.gpotato.eu) sees you take charge of a castle full of heroes, who can lead armies, complete quests and slay monsters. *Heroes of Might & Magic* fans will be right at home with this clever combination of strategy and RPG. The next update will enhance equipment: no longer dependant on the luck of the loot tables, items will be customisable by using enchantment. There's also a new 'gemming' sy stem that lets players collect gems and slot them into weapons for added effects. Time to polish up that sword of banana farming – we're going to reforge it into a +10 blade of manslaying.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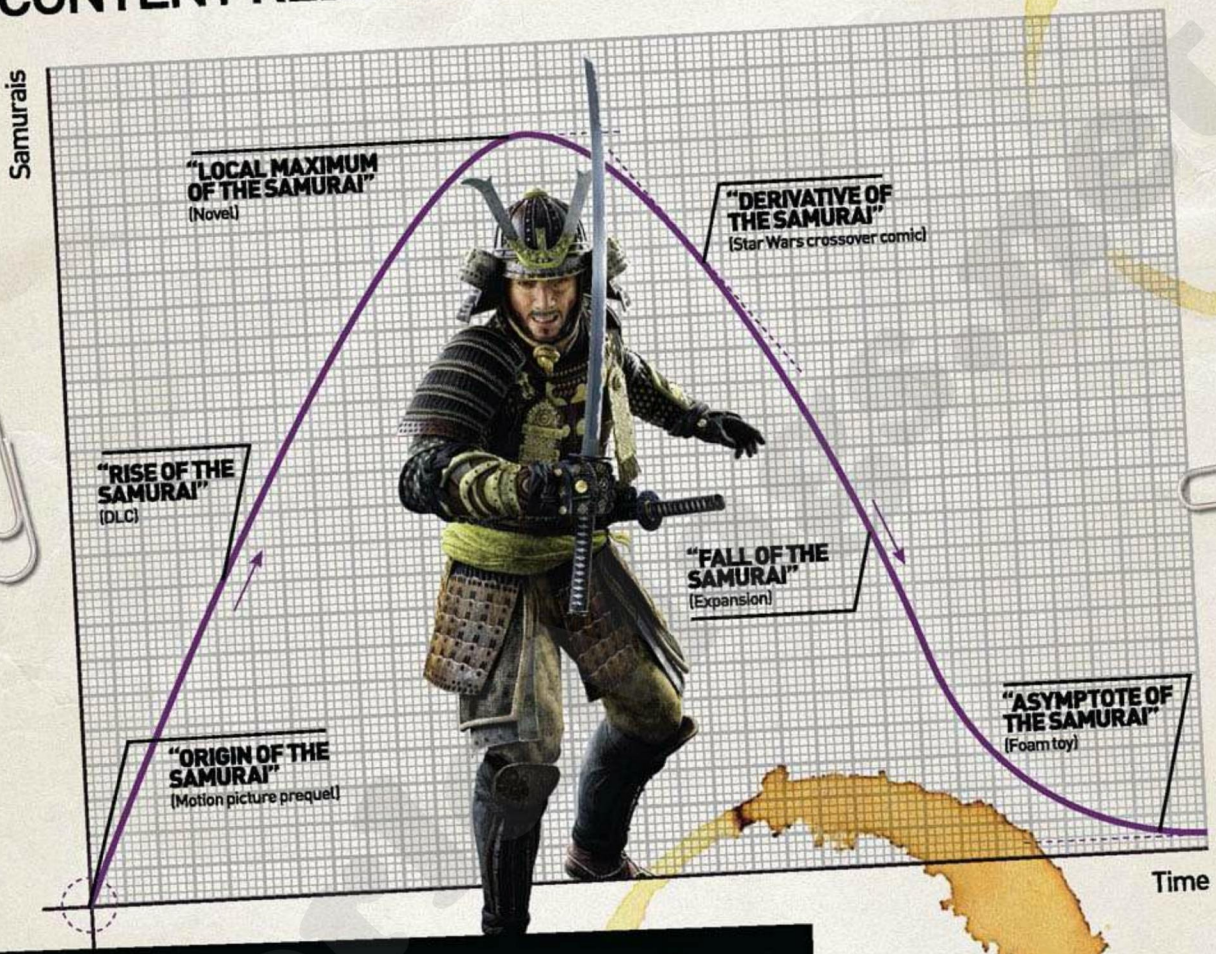

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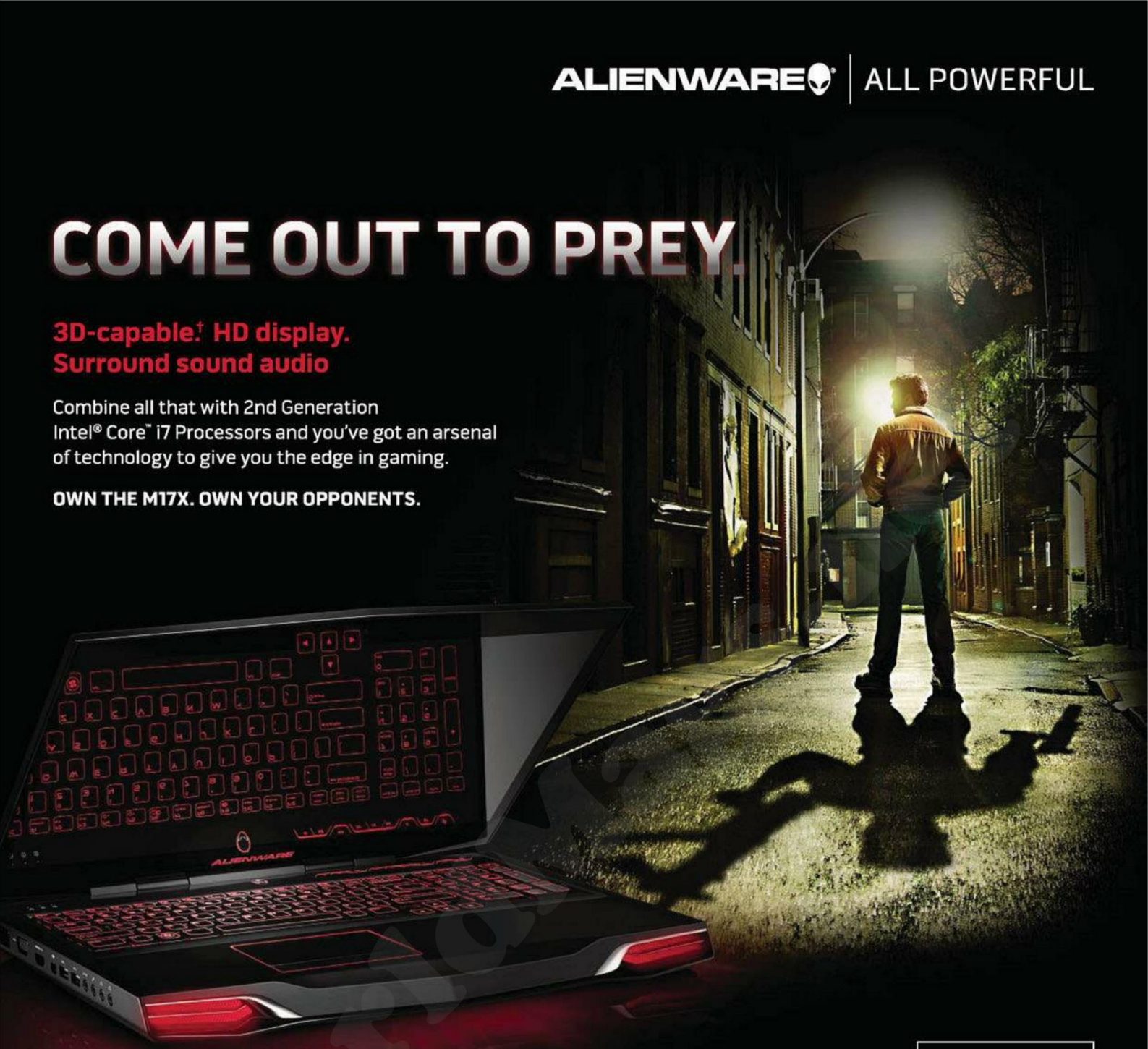

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